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June 19, 1888.

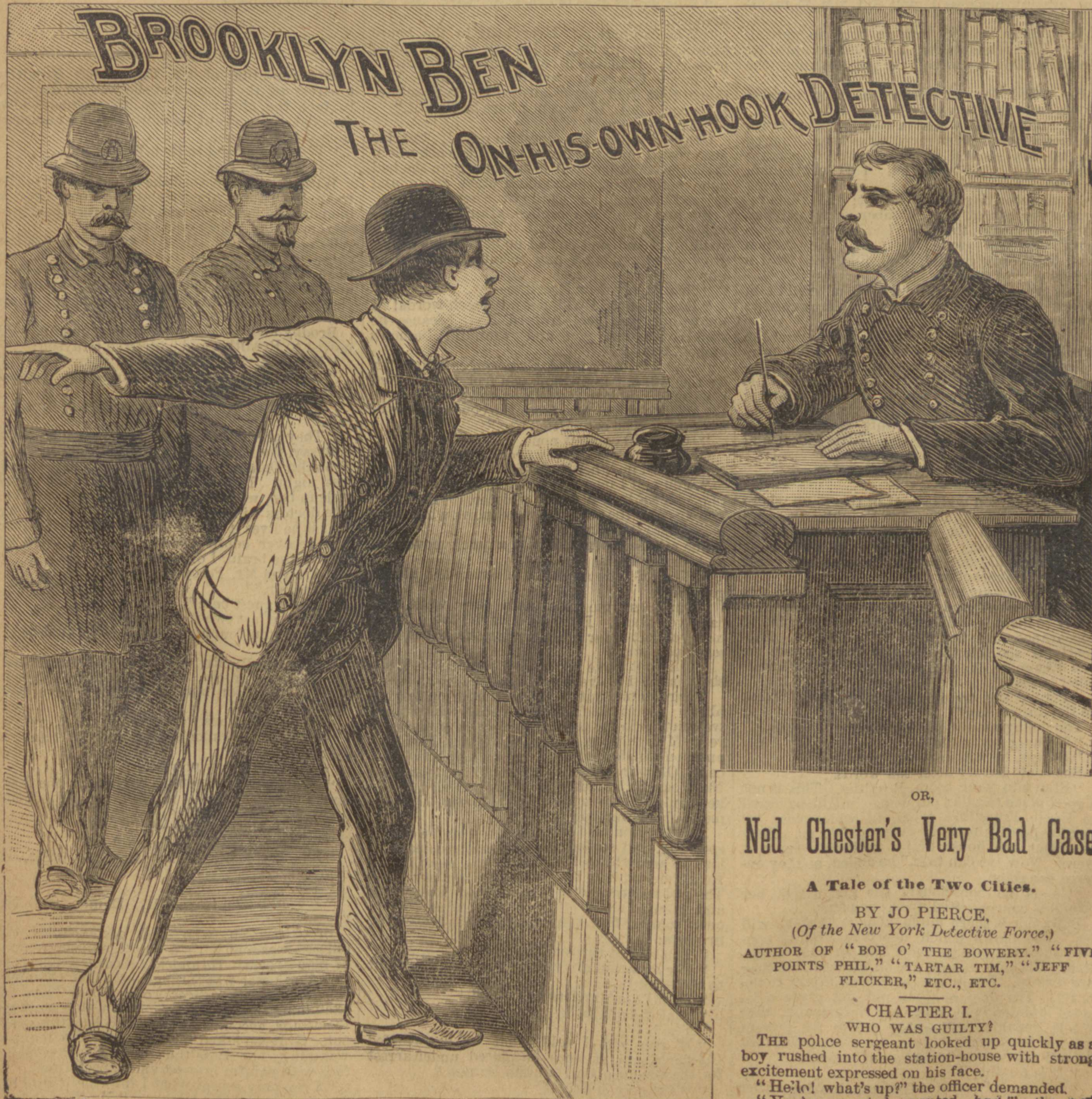
Vol. XXII.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 569.



"YOU'RE WANTED—WANTED BAD!" BROOKLYN BEN BREATHLESSLY GASPED.

OR,

Ned Chester's Very Bad Case

A Tale of the Two Cities.

BY JO PIERCE,

(Of the New York Detective Force.)

AUTHOR OF "BOB O' THE BOWERY," "FIVE
POINTS PHIL," "TARTAR TIM," "JEFF
FLICKER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WHO WAS GUILTY?

THE police sergeant looked up quickly as a boy rushed into the station-house with strong excitement expressed on his face.

"Hello! what's up?" the officer demanded.

"You're wanted—wanted bad!" the boy breathlessly gasped.

"Where? What for?"

"There's murder been done, or if it isn't one now, it's liable to be. He's hurt the worst way!"

"Who is hurt? Don't talk at random. Be precise!"

The boy leaned against the railing and struggled manfully to recover his breath.

"It is Mr. Franklin Damon, of Clinton street—"

"I know the place. What's the matter?"

"We found him in bed, this morning, unconscious. Somebody had struck him on the head, and we think he can't live. The doctor hasn't come yet."

"No clew to who did it?"

"No, sir."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Benjamin Hamlin, and I work there—"

"I think I know the boy," interrupted a roundsman. "Don't they call you 'Brooklyn Ben'?"

"Sometimes, sir."

"Brodby, take two men and go with the boy," directed the sergeant. "If you find his story confirmed, do what you think is necessary and make prompt report. As soon as I can finish my present business I will aid you, if necessary."

The officer named lost no time in getting away. He remembered the house occupied by Franklin Damon, though he did not know the man.

He asked for particulars as they hurried along, but there was very little to tell.

Mr. Damon, who was a very regular riser, had not appeared that morning as usual, though events soon showed that he had an important engagement with a friend. This gentleman, unwilling to wait, had insisted upon seeing Damon according to agreement; and when repeated knocks at the chamber door had met with no response, the caller had taken the housemaid's key and opened the door. Mr. Damon was discovered in bed, insensible, and with a serious wound upon his head.

This was all that "Brooklyn Ben" could tell, except that he had at once been dispatched to give the alarm.

When asked for a list of the members of the family, and the servants, he gave it as follows:

Franklin Damon, owner of the house; Rosalthe Damon, his ward; Ned Chester, his nephew; Percy Grayson, a distant relative; Hannah Damon, aged relative; Samuel Egan, a bookkeeper; and the servants—Jules Lefranc, male cook; Lois Beauvais and Kittie Miles; and Timothy Killion the coachman.

Brooklyn Ben, himself, completed the list.

Percy Grayson walked out of the room where the doctors were fighting for Franklin Damon's life, with Death for an opponent. He was a tall, blonde young man with a face which, at first glance, did not seem to indicate any great strength of character.

He was moving along the hall when there was a rustling sound and a young lady came hurriedly to his side. She was pale and startled of appearance, but her eyes were tearless. Evidently, if she felt the blow it had stricken her in a way more dangerous than that which finds relief in tears.

"Percy," she tremulously whispered, "what do the doctors say?"

The young man shook his head.

"Nothing favorable."

"Surely, he will not—will not—die?"

She could hardly utter the words.

"Step into your room, Rosalthe. This is not a good place to talk; our voices might be heard in Uncle Franklin's room, in which case we should speedily have the doctors after us. They have put the house under military rule, as it were. Now we can talk," he added, as they entered her room.

"Is—is he conscious?" the girl asked, her thoughts concentrated upon one point.

"No, nor is there much chance that he will be. The blows which deprived him of consciousness bid fair to keep him in that condition. His only wounds are on the head, but they are serious. I dare say there is an injury to the brain. The doctors have not yet given a decided opinion, but they say, informally, that Uncle Franklin will either die in his present state or lie several days as he is—in brief, that he will not recover his senses at present."

"It is terrible!"

"Of course," pursued Grayson, looking at her attentively, "this is liable to prevent the discovery of the assassin. Were he to become conscious, he could tell who struck him."

Rosalthe looked at the speaker for a second; then her gaze again dropped.

"Of course," she replied, in a low voice.

"It is singular that no one heard a disturbance during the night."

"Yes."

"Did you sleep soundly, Rosalthe?"

"Yes."

"And, of course, heard no one prowling around?"

"I did not."

She answered firmly, even defiantly, but her gaze was still averted. She appeared nervous and ill at ease, but this was not strange, considering the tragedy of the house.

"The police will soon be here," resumed Grayson, "and then we shall all be questioned."

The girl drew a long, tremulous breath. Grayson lowered his voice and, bending his head close to hers, asked:

"What do you suppose they will say when they know of Ned Chester's quarrel with Uncle Franklin?"

Rosalthe started back as though she had received a blow. Her pale face grew paler, and the startled look in her dark eyes became more noticeable. She looked at Grayson with a terrified expression.

"Who would dare tell them of that?" she demanded.

"Who can hide it? Everybody in the house knows of the quarrel, and it will soon be public property. It makes it bad for Ned, I admit."

"Percy Grayson, what do you mean? You know that Ned never harmed Uncle Franklin. How could he? He was not here last night."

"Are you sure?"

Grayson asked the question quietly, but his gaze rested upon her face with pitiless attention. Rosalthe could not well look worse than she had done before, but she made a start again, and pressed her hand unsteadily over her heart.

"I am sure," she replied, after a pause, her voice once more defiant. "He went to stay with his friend, and he had no key to this house. How dare you cast any insinuations against him?"

"Gently, my dear Rosalthe—"

"Be still, sir! I will not hear such words! I know how you feel toward Ned, because he stands between you and Franklin Damon's money, but—"

"And I," interrupted Grayson, catching her by the wrist, "know how you feel toward Ned Chester! You love the fellow, and you are none too good to shield him from the consequences of his crime, if he committed one."

"He would commit none."

Grayson looked sharply around, to make sure that he had no other listener.

"You and I may as well have an understanding," he said, in a harsh whisper. "Rosalthe, you are not the only one who knows what happened here last night!"

She released her arm with a quick movement and started back.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, almost gaspingly.

"Don't ask me to explain here; walls have ears, you know. Let it be enough that I know how you left your room during the night, and what you saw!"

"I did not leave my room!" she declared, but she trembled in every limb as she spoke.

"Pardon me, but I know what I am talking about. Don't be afraid that I shall tell on you; we can't undo the past, and may as well let it rest. My sympathies are all with you, Rosalthe, and you can depend upon me to help you all I can. Of course an outsider would not look upon Ned's case as leniently as we do, and all must be kept quiet. Rely upon me to help you; consider me your unswerving friend."

Mr. Grayson held out his hand as he ceased speaking, and smiled broadly, and seemed anxious to array himself as being the best friend Rosalthe had, but his hand was not accepted. The girl was recovering her coolness somewhat, and though the frightened look did not disappear from her face, she answered with increasing firmness:

"You talk at random, Percy."

"For once you are wrong; I am talking right to the point."

"Then I don't understand you."

"Shall I explain?"

"Yes."

"If you and I told what we know, Ned Chester would at once be placed under arrest for the assault upon Franklin Damon."

"What do you know?"

"As much as you do."

"You evade an answer, sir."

"What would you have? Shall we tell all we

know here, where a servant may overhear it? Last night, Rosalthe, you were in the hall, and you know what you saw there—*whom* you saw there. For Ned's sake, let us say no more. Rosalthe, you don't know how I honor you—admire you—for your noble loyalty. I have always thought you the noblest, best and fairest of women, and now I love you—I mean, admire you more than ever. For Ned's sake we will say no more, but bear in mind that I am your friend forever!"

The last words were spoken with an intensity which she could not fail to understand. She did understand them, and more. If Grayson had declared in plain words that Ned Chester had been Damon's assailant, and that it was in his power to expose him, he would not have made himself more plainly understood.

And why should he not tell all that he knew, anyway? His words, taken with the events of the past, explained even this to Rosalthe. The price of Percy Grayson's silence was *her love!*

She gazed at him as he stood smiling evilly into her face, and new horror fell upon her. She had felt that there was more before than she could bear, but the end was not yet.

A servant appeared at the door.

"The police have come, Miss Rosalthe," was the announcement.

CHAPTER II.

THE POLICE COME.

THE condition of Mr. Damon left Rosalthe mistress of the house, but she was not disposed to face the officers of law. She mechanically directed the servant to show them in, and then turned to Grayson.

"Will you attend to them?"

"If you wish."

Without another word she started to leave the room, but paused abruptly at the door. For a moment she hesitated, and then turned back.

"I will stay," she announced.

Grayson bowed. He did not need to ask the cause of her sudden change of purpose; he knew that she was determined to be present, and see that he did not say anything to injure Ned Chester. Mr. Grayson, however, had not one word of comment to make.

Brodby and his fellow-officers came in. He bowed to Rosalthe, and addressed Grayson:

"May I ask who is in authority here?"

"It is Miss Damon," courteously replied Percy, with a wave of his hand.

"I wish to know the particulars of this affair."

"They are, unfortunately, very simple; that is to say, we know only the bare details. Mr. Franklin Damon was in good health and spirits last night. This morning he was found insensible in bed, with serious wounds on his head. The doctors will not answer for his life, and say that if he lives it will be several days before he will recover consciousness. There is some injury to the brain, I dare say!"

"Are you Mr. Percy Grayson?"

"Yes, sir."

"And a guest here?"

"For the last two months—yes."

"Have you found no clew to the would-be assassins?"

"None at all; Mr. Damon's door was locked; the windows of the room were duly fastened. Neither the door nor the windows have been tampered with."

"How many keys were there to the door?"

"Two; Mr. Damon's own, and the chambermaid's."

"Where are they now?"

"The second was used to unlock the door, and, I dare say, is still in the door. We do not know where Mr. Damon's key is."

"Who is the chambermaid?"

"Her name is Lois Beauvais."

"She keeps her keys during the night, of course."

"Yes."

"I would like to see Mr. Damon, and the room."

Brooklyn Ben, who had accompanied the officers, was sent with a message to the wounded man's room. He quickly returned to report that the doctor was through with his examination, and that the officers could do no harm by examining the room fully. When they went in, the doctor, accompanied by his colleagues, came out. Grayson asked for a report. His manner was quiet, but Rosalthe studied the physician's face with painful interest and expectation.

"I can only repeat what I informally said before," answered the doctor. "Mr. Damon has, perhaps, an even chance to live, but what the result will really be no human power can now

say. If he lives, however, he is not likely to recover his senses for a good many days."

Rosalthe breathed a sigh of relief. Was it because Mr. Damon had an even chance to recover, or because he would remain unconscious for a considerable time?

She looked up and caught Percy Grayson's gaze fixed meaningfully upon her. She felt at that moment as though she could strike the man with all the force of her woman's arm.

Brodby soon brought his men back. He had decided very clearly on one point; the assailant of Mr. Damon had not broken into the room. The one door and the two windows were intact. Mr. Damon's own key had been found on the floor of his room, partially behind the door. It had either been thrust under the door, after the assassin had locked it on the outside, or had been put there to create that impression and deceive the police. Which was the correct theory he did not yet know.

The officer was inclined to be suspicious, and he asked that Lois Beauvais be summoned. She came promptly—a pretty French girl who, very likely, had been gay and saucy the day before. That seemed to be her nature. Now she looked very much like her young mistress; she was pale and nervous.

Brodby questioned her rapidly.

"Your name is Lois Beauvais?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are chambermaid here, and carry the duplicate keys to the upper part of the house, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does any one else ever have these keys?"

"Once in a great while Miss Hannah Damon does."

"Distant relative, and superannuated house-keeper," tersely explained Grayson.

"Did she have the keys last night?"

"No, sir."

"Did any one but you have them?"

"No, sir."

"Did they leave your possession?"

"They did not."

"State where you keep them day and night."

"In my pocket. There are but a few of them, and I carry them on a ring. They never leave my pocket except when I open a door. They stay there day and night."

"Do you know that they were all there when you retired last night?"

"No, but they were all there this morning, and the doors of my room were securely bolted and locked, and the windows were fastened. No one could have entered my room."

"You have a room-mate?"

"Yes, sir; Kittie Miles, the table-girl."

"Send Kittie here."

Lois hastened out, and Kittie soon appeared. Like Miss Rosalthe and Lois, Kittie seemed nervous and greatly shocked. She was a prepossessing young woman. She told her story frankly. She had nothing to do with the keys, but was sure no one could have entered their room while they were asleep. Like all the other witnesses she had heard nothing suspicious during the night.

"We shall have to admit that Damon's key, not the duplicate one, was used to lock his door after the deed was done," observed Brodby, though he was not ready, in reality, to admit anything of the kind.

He now settled down to his work in earnest, and questioned every member of the household within his reach—these being Miss Rosalthe, Miss Hannah Damon, Lois and Kittie, for the females; and Grayson, Mr. Eagan, Lefranc, Benjamin Hamlin and Tim Killion for the men.

He had several questions to ask each, but to all he addressed the following inquiries: Had they heard any suspicious sounds during the night? Had they seen any suspicious person hovering around? Did they know of trouble between Mr. Damon and any other person?

To each of these came the undeviating reply—No!

Brodby began to think that he had grappled with a genuine mystery. Damon had received no company during the evening; there was no sign to show that any one had broken into the house; Lefranc, whose duty it was to secure the house before he retired, declared that he was sure it had been properly secured; yet, some one had assaulted Franklin Damon with murderous effect, if not intent.

Who had done it?

The officer decided that the assailant had been a member of the household, or that he had been admitted secretly by a member of the household, or that he had been secreted there when the doors were locked for the night unknown to any one inside.

Which was it?

Brodby looked at Percy Grayson.

"It seems to me there is one member of the household missing," he said. "Where is Ned Chester?"

Rosalthe's face grew tremulous; it lost the small amount of color it had gained during the last few minutes.

"Ned stayed with his friend, Albert Marsh, on Henry street, last night," readily replied Grayson.

"Where is he now?"

"By Jove!" quoth Percy, "I don't believe any one has sent word to him. This is inexcusably negligent. Here, Ben Hamlin, go over at once and notify Ned. You know the house, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," answered Brooklyn Ben.

Just then the door-bell rung.

Ben left the room, but just as he reached the head of the stairs a hand was laid upon his arm. He turned and saw Rosalthe Damon.

"You need not go," she said, hurriedly; "that is, I think Mr. Chester is here now. I think that was his ring. Wait here!"

She hastened down the stairs, and Ben paused in irresolution. He knew that the order to bring Chester, being practically indorsed by the official, outweighed his mistress's order, but it would do no harm to wait a moment.

Rosalthe opened the door, and Ben saw that it was, indeed, Ned Chester. The latter came in quickly. Rosalthe closed the door, and then grasped his arm.

"Do you know?—have you heard?" she demanded, in an agitated whisper.

Ned Chester thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his coat. He looked at her without emotion.

"I have heard that Franklin Damon is lying at the point of death, and that it was the work of an assassin."

"The police are up-stairs, Ned."

"Why not? He was a rich and eminently respectable gentleman!" was the reply, with an undisguised sneer.

"Ned, don't speak that way!"

"How should I speak?"

"At this time—"

"I will not bow at his feet at this, or any other time."

"Ned, he is unconscious, and they expect him to lie that way for many days to come. The police have no clew, whatever."

Rosalthe's manner grew more earnest, and one would have said that she was trying to convey some idea to her companion. He, however, did not, or would not, understand.

"Indeed?" was his careless response.

"They are questioning every member of the household. It seems that they think the assassin may have been an inmate of this house, and hope that he will betray himself under examination."

"Ah! Expect him to be a fool, as well as a rascal, eh?"

"Ned, Ned!—don't speak in such a harsh way!"

"My esteemed cousin, I have no tears to shed over Franklin Damon. Do you want me to act the hypocrite?"

"I want you to remember that the police are going to suspect *somebody*. We have all gone in nervously, and talked in hushed voices. If you go in so defiantly, what will they think of you?"

His face suddenly softened, and he took the hand which she had laid upon his arm, his manner undergoing a complete change.

"Pardon me, Rosalthe! Your kind words are duly appreciated, and I thank you cordially. The whole case may be summed up in few words: I am no friend of Franklin Damon, and I am not going to act the hypocrite now that he is—"

"You must not let them see that you are not his friend."

"Why not?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"Oh! Ned, Ned! this will not do!" cried the girl, in a frightened manner. "You know—you must see—Ned, no one has told that you had trouble with him, and you must not tell. If you do, the police will suspect you!"

"On the ocean," Chester answered, "we act as we feel, and show the white feather to no one. Wait!—hear me out, Rosalthe. You know more about the ways of city life than I do, and I feel that I could follow no more friendly, no more interesting prompter than you. For your sake, I will go in and be as meek as a lamb. Are the police waiting to see me?"

"Yes."

"I'll go to them at once, and for your sake, Rosalthe, I'll see that I acquit myself well. For your sake! Man could have no greater motive for his actions!"

CHAPTER III.

SHADOWS OF MYSTERY.

YOUNG Chester pressed Rosalthe's hand warmly, and then turned and went steadily up the stairs. She looked after him with an anxious, troubled expression which made her look years older than she was. There had been a time when the last words he had uttered would have fallen pleasantly upon her ears, and, perhaps, have brought increased color to her face, but she scarcely realized now that they had been spoken.

"Pray Heaven!"

She whispered the two words, and then checked herself abruptly. Whatever prayer was in her heart, her lips did not utter it then.

Young Ben Hamlin had seen and heard enough of this interview to cause him some wonder, but he had no desire to act the spy, and he had drawn back and tried to act a dignified part.

He saw Chester as he came up the stairs, and was impressed by the expression on his face. Usually Ned was jovial and hearty, bringing the customs of the ocean to the land, but a change seemed to have come to him. His face bore a scowl, and he was clearly very much dissatisfied with something.

As he reached the hall his face cleared promptly.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"In there, sir," Ben answered, pointing.

"Very well."

And then Chester walked into the presence of Brodby and his fellow officers.

Even Rosalthe could not have found fault with his manner then. He toned down his sailor manners, and walked into the room quietly, yet with a becoming air of interest.

"Mr. Brodby, this is Mr. Chester," said Grayson.

Both gentlemen bowed.

"You are Mr. Franklin Damon's nephew, I believe?" said Brodby, at once.

"I am, sir."

"When did you hear of your uncle's misfortune?"

"Half an hour ago, possibly. I was with my friend, Alfred Marsh, who lives on Henry street, when we heard one man tell another on the street. I made inquiries, learned the facts—as far as the man knew them—and came here."

"You stayed with Mr. Marsh last night?"

"Yes."

"At what hour were you here?"

"At about eleven A. M."

"Was Mr. Damon then in his usual spirits?"

"I did not see him."

"How was that?"

"I hardly know, except that he was in his study. I saw only Miss Rosalthe Damon and Mr. Grayson."

Percy smiled in a peculiar way at the first part of this answer, but the smile was not seen by the officers or Chester.

"In case Mr. Damon should die you would, I am informed, become possessed of all his property—that is, you are his direct heir."

"Now you mention it, I believe I am."

"As such you must be greatly interested in the case. Pray, what is your theory as to the crime?"

"I don't know that I have one."

"Indeed!" said Brodby, in real or affected surprise.

"You must remember that I don't know a thing about the particulars."

"They are significant. No one broke into the house; no door or window was tampered with; the windows and door of Mr. Damon's room were found fastened; and it is clear that the assailant retreated through this door. There were two keys to it—Mr. Damon's and the chambermaid's. The former was found upon the floor, where it may have been pushed by the guilty person under the door. The chambermaid declares her keys did not leave her possession last night. Here the mystery begins. Now comes another point. Who was the criminal? The question, How did he get into the house? is not half so mysterious as, How did he get out? Every door and window was found properly secured. How did the would-be assassin get out?"

Brodby paused and looked significantly at Chester.

"It grows mysterious," admitted Ned.

"Decidedly so. No man can pass out through

a window and spring the catch after him, nor can he lock a door after him without a key or some other implement. What does all this indicate?"

"Mystery," responded Ned.

Mr. Brodby made a gesture of disgust.

"It shows one of two things," he resumed. "Either the assailant was some one in this house, or he had a confederate inside."

So saying, the officer closed his jaws in a stubborn way, and looked at Ned inquiringly. He was of the opinion that the young man was stupid, but he must be duly talked with, since he was Damon's heir. He now surprised Mr. Brodby by a little reasoning.

"You speak of the two keys. I don't think Mr. Damon's was used."

"Explain."

"To my knowledge he always locked his door early in the evening—as soon as he had retired to his room. It is not likely that he passed out the key to his assassin, and no one else could. Hence, it must have been the other key which admitted the assailant to his room."

Mr. Brodby caressed his bristly mustache thoughtfully. Here was a view of the case which had not occurred to him, but he could not deny the force of the argument, nor did he wish to.

"When Mr. Damon locked his door, did he leave the key in the lock?"

"That I don't know."

"If he did, it would not have been easy to unlock the door with the other key, either."

"True."

Brodby felt that he was in deeper water than he was able to struggle with, and he turned the conversation.

"Do you know that Mr. Damon had trouble with any one?"

Percy Grayson turned squarely toward Chester. His lip curled with a slight smile, and he watched his relative sharply. Ned did not even glance at him.

"I know of none," the sailor answered, calmly.

"No trouble with the servants?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Do you know anything about his business affairs?"

"Nothing whatever."

"I expected you to know more, since you are his heir."

"Excuse me, but I think particulars have not yet been given you. I am hardly acquainted with him. I never saw him but twice until I was twenty years old. Since that time I have had no home except my ship, and as I have been sailing out of New York once a year, I have been away once a year. This is my longest stay—one month."

"Ah! I understand now. Well, Mr. Chester, we will, of course, do our best to clear up the mystery. I will not detain you longer."

Chester had borne the interview with quiet composure, and had shown an outward frankness very much in his favor, but if the face of Mr. Percy Grayson had been scanned closely it would have suggested a doubt.

Mr. Brodby had determined to wait for his superiors to take charge before going further, and he settled back in his chair. Grayson sat down by the window, but Chester walked out of the room.

He encountered Kitty Miles in the hall.

"Where is Miss Rosalthe?" he asked.

"In her room, sir."

"Please take her this card."

He drew a bit of pasteboard from his pocket and hurriedly wrote one line.

"I would like to see you for a moment."

Kittie went away with it. When she returned she bore a sealed envelope, upon which was Ned's name in Rosalthe's writing. He tore it open and found his card inclosed. Upon it was an additional line of Rosalthe's composition. It was as follows:

"Excuse me, but I cannot see you now."

A look of surprise passed over Ned's face, and then he crushed the card in his hand. He could not understand it; the message was not like Rosalthe. She was too frank and friendly to offer such a threadbare apology on common occasions, while the last part, "I cannot see you now," was very unsatisfactory. Why couldn't she see him? It sounded curt, and he felt hurt.

"Anything more, sir?" asked Kittie.

"No!"

It was his turn to be curt, and Kittie tossed her head and marched indignantly away.

Ned meditated for a moment, and grew more vexed concerning the note. He felt sure that it

meant something unusual, and that, too, not to his credit. He was as impetuous as most young persons are, and he flung the card into a waste-paper basket which in the confusion of the day, had been left in the hall for awhile. Then he went to his own room.

He had barely disappeared when Percy Grayson moved along the hall and paused by the waste-basket. He picked up the card which Ned had thrown away, and thrust it into his pocket. Then he stirred up the contents of the basket slightly, so that if Ned returned the absence of the card would not seem so suspicious; then, like his relative, he retired to his private room.

Once there he straightened the card and laid it on the table. He read the two messages, and a smile passed over his face as he reached that of Rosalthe.

"So she will not see him! Poor Rosalthe! She is in a mood far from happy, and I must say that her position and mine is a painful one. On the one hand there is Franklin Damon, the noblest of men, stricken down, suffering and unconscious; and on the other, poor Ned! What are we to do? I don't know, and it is not strange that she is at a loss. One moment she is all interested in Chester, and loyal to him; the next, she shrinks from him with horror! It is a terrible secret we hold!"

He arose and began to pace the room slowly.

"This is a time that tries one's soul," he muttered. "I ought to tell the police that Ned was here last night, but it would ruin the boy. My whole nature shrinks from it—I fear that I am not hard enough for practical life. Did I speak roughly to Rosalthe this morning? I'm afraid I did, but I was so upset that I scarcely knew what I said. Well, well, she and I will hold Ned's secret and see what comes of it."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SERVANT'S SECRET.

BEN HAMLIN sat on the lower step of the basement stairs and meditated. He had just heard Kittie Miles tell a little story to Jules Lefranc, the cook.

"Rosalthe is mad at Ned Chester," affirmed Miss Miles. "She has gone to her room and won't see him. He wrote her a very pathetic note, which I saw, pleading for the privilege of seeing her just a moment, but she wrote back that him and her was no longer friends, and she wouldn't see him nohow. There is some things I can't understand."

Kittie's exaggerated and ungrammatical report was due to what she considered her ill-treatment at Ned's hands. The French cook gave her no encouragement to say more. His reply was brief and sarcastic, and Kittie was made doubly angry.

Ben, however, paid more attention to what she said than Lefranc seemed to do. He had been using his own eyes and ears, and was very much of Kittie's opinion when she said that there were some things which she could not understand.

The boy was of an observing nature, and he could not help thinking that there was a drama under the surface at Franklin Damon's house. He had seen Rosalthe and Percy Grayson hold a secret conversation; he had overheard a part of the talk in the hall between Rosalthe and Ned; and there were minor points not easily described, but expressed by looks and actions, which struck him as being odd.

He could not banish the idea from his mind that some one at the house knew more about the assault upon Damon than had yet been told.

Believing this, suspicion could gravitate, at that period of affairs, in one direction only.

Despite the fact that he and all the other witnesses had assured Brodby that they knew of no trouble between Franklin Damon and any other person, he did not know of such trouble, and every other witness had known of it. Ned Chester had quarreled with Damon. The boy could not presume to say what motive had influenced other witnesses to remain silent, but he had done so because the example had been placed before him by those older than he, and because he had a vague idea that Ned Chester was above suspicion.

The cause of the quarrel he did not know, and none of the servants knew; he doubted if it could be explained by any one except Damon and Ned. Something had made the latter very angry; he had denounced his uncle loudly, and the quarrel had followed. When it was over, Damon had shown a disposition to forgive all, and had acted very gently, but young Chester had been implacable.

This had occurred several days before, and Ned had at once left the house. He had called

three times afterward, but had passed only one night there—that before the tragic mystery—and had only remained then because Rosalthe had over-persuaded him.

"She over-persuaded him again in the hall, just now," thought Ben seriously. "She has a good deal of influence over him. He feels hard toward Damon, and would have gone up and made it known to Brodby if she hadn't put a stop to it. Then what's the matter with her? She never cared any great for Damon, and willingly lets somebody else take care of him now, but she is all demoralized about something. What?"

Just then Lois Beauvais, the smart chambermaid, came down the stairs. Ben moved for her, and then went up to the hall. Lois passed on toward the kitchen. When she entered it another female form whisked out of the shadows and approached the door. This person was Kittie Miles, and it was plain that she had been hiding for some reason.

She reached the kitchen door and placed one ear to the key-hole. She expected to hear voices, and she was not disappointed. The first was that of Jules Lefranc, the cook.

"Have the officers gone?" he asked.

"No."

The reply was in Lois's voice, short and sharp.

"Who's on the rack now?"

"Nobody; they're waiting for somebody higher in authority."

"Wait a bit, Lois. Where are you going?"

"Up-stairs."

"Your business is not pressing; I want to speak with you."

"I have nothing to say."

"Eh, Lois! What's come over you? You're as short as pie-crust. Come, you are not going yet, I want to talk with you."

Kittie had been on the point of fleeing back into the shadows, for she had heard Lois moving toward the door, but new movements showed that Jules had intercepted her. Kittie remained.

"Let me go!" said Lois hurriedly.

"Let you go! Come, my dear; this won't do. Why are you so suddenly turned to vinegar? Has this affair up-stairs upset you?"

"Yes, it has."

"I thought you had better nerves. What! are you of French blood, and a coward?"

"I am not a coward!" sharply cried Lois.

"Then you've got too much human feeling."

"I know those who ain't got too much!" retorted the girl.

"Ah! That sounds pointed. What do you mean?"

"Never mind; let me go."

"Not yet."

"I will go!—you villain!"

"Eh? What's that? Devils alive! you are carrying with a high hand, my lady. Pretty words with which to address your future husband."

"You never will be my husband! Let me go."

"Ha! let you go with such words upon your lips? Not much; stand where you are, made-moiselle; I want an explanation. What do you mean by all this?"

"I can't tell."

"I insist. You don't leave this room until I know."

"Then have it!" cried Lois, "if you will. Don't you think that I am so ignorant as I seem of what happened here last night. I know all!"

Lefranc staggered back against the door. His face lost color, and his grasp on her arm relaxed as though all strength had gone from his fingers.

"You know!" he gasped.

"I do—now let me go!"

She pushed him aside as though he had been a child, and opened the door so suddenly that Kittie barely had time to secrete herself. Lois fled along the hall, while Jules, as Kittie could see through the open door, stood in silent dismay. But Lois went only to the stairs; she turned back and hurried to the kitchen door. Her mood had changed; her lips trembled, and her eyes were filled with fears.

"Jules," she said, in an unsteady voice, "there is nothing to fear from me. I will never tell a word while I live!"

The Frenchman caught her hand and kissed it fervently.

"Heaven bless you, dear girl!" he murmured.

"You are the true woman I thought you. Keep the secret, though the police try to draw it from you by torture. I will never speak. The deed is done; that is certain, whether Damon lives or dies. Let the secret die with him, if he dies. Bless you, Lois!"

Once more he tried to raise her hand to his lips, but she snatched it away and again ran along the hall. This time she went up the stairs.

Just then the door-bell rung, and Brooklyn Ben admitted a tall, slender, serious-faced man who seemed very much like a clergyman.

"I want to see the master of the house," he said, quietly.

"Mr. Damon is—"

Ben was interrupted.

"I know. Perhaps I should say that I want to see whoever is acting in his place."

"That's Mr. Chester. I shall tell him—"

"Conduct me to him. I am a detective."

The ministerial-looking gentleman spoke boldly, for he knew that his character would soon be known to all. There was no use of temporizing.

Ben was duly impressed, and he conducted the caller to the room where Brodby waited with his fellow officers. Ned Chester and Grayson had not returned. Mr. Brodby greeted the new-comer with great respect. He knew him to be named Sloan—a man reputed as clear-headed as any detective on the Brooklyn force. Mr. Sloan merely nodded.

"Sit down," he added, after this curt greeting, "and tell me all that you have learned."

Brodby obeyed. He told all that he knew, and then gave his theories. Feeling that he ought to have one idea more prominent than the others, he gave it to Mr. Sloan, in substance as follows: The deed had been done by some outside party who had had the aid of a confederate in the house, and the latter had locked the door after the would-be assassin.

"Was anything stolen?" asked Sloan.

"Not a thing."

"What, then, was the motive of the deed?"

"Revenge, I think."

"Whom had Damon injured?"

"That I don't know, but somebody must have hated him."

"I want to see the witnesses."

The detective saw them. One after another he interviewed all, from Ned Chester down to Brooklyn Ben. They found him a very mild-mannered man. He did not talk so loudly, nor put his questions so sharply as Mr. Brodby had done. Except for one thing they would have felt quite at ease under the examination—while questioning them, however, the detective looked at them with singular intentness. His eyes were not particularly sharp, but they were steady, and his undeviating attention was unpleasant to some of the witnesses.

He let the last one go without having said anything unpleasant.

"Well, sir, what do you think?" asked Brodby.

"The day is fine, sir."

"Excuse me; I referred to the case."

"And I, sir, said nothing about the case."

Brodby's face reddened, and he then held his peace. He had been shut out of the great man's confidence, and there was only one thing to do—accept the inevitable.

Mr. Sloan took out a note-book and made a record. It was in cipher, and so intricate that a professional reader of cryptograms might have despaired of reading it. Reduced to plain English, the record was as follows:

"Probably the guilty person was well known to Franklin Damon, and trusted by him. If an outsider, probably Damon, himself, secretly admitted him to the house. But who let him out? *Mem:* Look well to Chester, Lefranc, Miss Damon, Kitty and Lois. Was it guilt or fright?"

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERIOUS PROCEEDINGS.

BROOKLYN BEN was returning from an errand. The day had worn on until noon had passed by two hours. All the officers had gone, and the Damon house was as quiet as though a funeral was about to take place. Ben had enjoyed the change of going out as young persons will, and was somewhat reluctantly returning.

Now, Ben had a pair of keen, observing eyes, and as he went along he suddenly noticed a man who was preceding him on the sidewalk. He could not see this person's face, but there was something familiar about his way of walking which his figure did not confirm. Ben knew the one, but not the other, and he was perplexed.

"Looks like Sloan's gait," he muttered, "but the man can't have gained forty pounds since morning, and his black hair can't very well have turned red. What does it mean? Hello!

what a precious dunce I am! I've heard of detectives disguising themselves, and I guess Sloan has, too; if I'm not uncommonly stupid, that is he!"

Ben grew excited. He had a good deal of interest in the gentlemen of Sloan's profession, but his actual knowledge of them amounted to nothing. Now here was a genuine detective, and that, too, in disguise. What was he going to do?

They had nearly reached Damon's house. Sloan crossed the street, ascended the steps of another house and rung the bell.

"He's got the wrong house," thought Ben; and then came the self-inquiry if he was actually right—if the man was really Sloan.

Nine persons out of ten would have declared to the contrary, and perhaps Ben would have done so if he had been fifteen years older. Certainly the stout man did not look like Sloan—Ben had seen his face as he ascended the steps—and the boy would never have suspected him through the medium of his appearance. He had reached his conclusion merely by the way the man walked, before he had seen his face.

The door of the house opened; a few words passed between the applicant and the servant; and then the former entered.

"Odd!" thought Ben.

He looked critically at the house, though he had previously known its appearance well. It was a house where furnished rooms were let to "genteel parties," as the landlady expressed it. She believed that she kept a very exclusive place, but Franklin Damon had always resented its presence so near his own home.

Brooklyn Ben lingered a short time, but as the stout man did not come out, he went on and entered the Damon house. Work awaited him there, and he forgot all about the supposed detective for a while.

An hour later he found himself in the second-floor hall. His gaze wandered across the way, and there, seated by an open window, the stout gentleman was composedly reading a paper. Ben was puzzled, and his theory was for a time in danger of being deserted, but another idea came to support it, and it wavered no more.

When Sloan had visited Damon's, Ben had at once set him down as a sharp man; the contrast between him and Brodby could not well escape such a keen observer as Ben; and when he retired he had left the impression in the boy's mind that he had a theory. Ben had one now.

The detective had hired a room from which to keep watch over the Damon house.

"This grows interesting," thought the boy; "but why should he watch here? Only one way to explain it, by gracious!—he suspects somebody in the house. Well, now! ain't this getting interesting?"

He looked at the man by the window admiringly.

"Wish I was a detective; I'd like just such work. I'd go over and see him, if I thought he'd take me into partnership—but he won't, and that's an end of it."

Ben was not a very useful assistant during the rest of the day. He forgot his regular duties and performed his new ones poorly, and all because his mind was not on his work. It was on the man at the window.

Evening came. Being in the summer season the days were long, and when, after the six o'clock dinner was fully disposed of, Ben glided into the hall for another look at the silent watcher, it was only beginning to grow dark. The watcher was by the window still, newspaper in hand.

"He's a good one!" thought Ben. "Shouldn't wonder if he would starve there, sooner than give up his vigil."

Ned Chester came down the stairs and went to the lower hall. Then Ben heard the rustle of a dress, and had enough curiosity to look over the balusters. Rosalthe had accosted Ned.

"Are you going out?" she asked, and the boy detected anxiety in her voice.

"Yes."

Ned answered curtly; he had not forgotten her refusal to see him at his request.

"You are not going away?"

"Didn't I say I was?"

"I mean, are you coming back?"

"That's the only way I can get here."

"You evade the question. What I mean is, are you going to leave Brooklyn, and New York?"

Ned thrust his hands deep into his pockets in his sailor fashion.

"Why in the world—I put it mildly because you are a lady—should I leave the places in question?"

"I didn't know but—but—"

Rosalthe faltered, and came to a full stop.

"Have I done anything to run away for?" brusquely demanded Ned.

"You ought to know best."

"I haven't committed robbery, arson, mur—"

"Hush! Ned, somebody might hear you."

Rosalthe looked nervously around.

"What if they do?"

Ned still remembered the curt answer to his note, and his manner was so rude that Rosalthe grew indignant. Her anxious, frightened manner gave place to one of proud contempt.

"Simply this," she replied, "another person might not be so lenient with you as I am."

And then she turned abruptly and entered the parlor, locking the door after her. Ned stared in wonder, not at Rosalthe, for he could not see her, but at the blank door.

"Well, I'll be shot!" he muttered, with all the appearance of being a puzzled man. Then he waited a moment, shook his head, and added: "Crazy as a March hare!"

And then he went calmly out of the house.

Ben retreated to his former post, considerably perplexed. Chester was going down the street, but—the man across the street was no longer at the window. Ben knit his brows into a thoughtful frown. What did it mean? Had the detective given up the search? Had he—

The door of the other house opened; the supposed detective appeared, all ready for the street; and then he, too, set off down the street. Ben's eyes flashed.

"Is he— No, it can't be. But it must. He's following Ned Chester!"

The idea seemed astonishing, but Ben quickly remembered two queer interviews between Ned and Rosalthe which he had overheard in part. All things were possible—He stopped to reason no further; he had been seized with a strong desire to be along with Ned and his pursuer, and out of this grew a resolution; he would go with them.

He fled to the basement, put on his hat, and went out without a word to anybody.

Ned and the detective had disappeared, but Ben was not discouraged. They had gone toward Fulton street, and he went the same way at a rapid pace. When he reached the latter thoroughfare he looked toward the left. The supposed detective was just crossing Clark street, and Ned was only a few yards ahead of him.

"Beats the dickens!" thought Ben. "The idea of Ned Chester being dogged by a detective! Wouldn't have believed it two days ago, but I never had an optical delusion, or whatever they call 'em, in my life. It must be so. Anyhow, it's prime fun to dog the detective while he's dogging Ned."

The boy's faith in his theory that the portly gentleman was lean Mr. Sloan, in disguise, was now complete, as was his infatuation for the work in hand. Though it cost him his place, he was determined to see the matter through.

The shades of night were increasing as fast as the lights from lamps of various kinds would allow.

Chester walked down Fulton street to Sands street, and then made for the entrance to the East River Bridge. He paid his toll, and the detective and Ben did the same. There were three cars on the train when it started, and no two of the trio went in the same car. Chester seemed to be unsuspecting, and if the detective knew that he was followed, he gave no sign.

Reaching the New York side Chester descended the steps briskly, passed beyond the entrance, turned to the right and went on at a quick pace. Sloan and Ben followed.

The pursuit took them to the Bowery—that street of New York which, in its way, is the most remarkable of all metropolitan streets—and Brooklyn Ben stopped short as he saw both the men, sailor and detective, enter a saloon. For the first time the boy began to have doubts. He had seen something of life, but not in a Bowery saloon, and he had an idea that he would not like life there. He had heard of such places as the haunts of cut throats. Dared he go in? He used the word "dare" in making the mental inquiry, and he determined to go, anyhow; it spurred him on.

He entered.

What he saw did not increase his courage. There was a remarkably long room, with tables scattered at intervals from end to end, and chairs around the tables. Upon the latter were several packs of cards, now in active use, for men were playing for amusement or "the drinks." It was a vile, dirty place, and the men were ragged, brutal looking fellows as a rule; the few well-dressed ones having the appearance of men who lived by their wits. The

room was crowded, and the long bar was doing a rushing business.

Ben hesitated once more; but, thinking that the crowd would partially screen him, and seeing other young fellows present, he went forward.

Chester had gone nearly to the further end of the room and sat down. Sloan took position a few yards away, and Ben took care to find a place nearly behind the detective. There he sat down, wondering what would be the result of the adventure, and why Ned had come there.

Before a minute had passed, he decided that the young sailor wished to see somebody in particular. Ned looked the crowd over carefully, and then watched both doors, taking care to see every one who came in.

Ben shivered as he looked at the desperadoes around him, and thought, What if Ned had been concerned in the Damon assault, and was there to meet his partner in crime?

CHAPTER VI. ON THE TRAIL.

SEVERAL minutes passed without any change in the situation. The unknown men drank, smoked and played cards at the tables, while Ned watched the doors and Sloan sat very much like a man of marble. He had ordered a glass of beer, and sat slowly drinking it as though he had no greater object in life just then.

Perhaps half an hour had passed when Ned suddenly showed new interest. He was looking toward one of the doors when Ben saw him start and then rise.

The boy looked toward the door. A flashily-dressed man had just entered. Evidently he was no stranger to the place, for he did not look around with any curiosity. He made his way to a table, rapped upon it to attract attention, and then held up one finger as a signal.

A glass of beer was brought. Ned Chester was still upon his feet and watching the new-comer, but the latter did not heed him. Ben studied Ned's face for further clues, but obtained none.

Suddenly the sailor walked forward and sat down beside the flashy man. That person looked at him without any appearance of recognition. Ned uttered some words, which, of course, Ben did not hear. The flashy man bowed and smiled pleasantly. Then Ned's manner grew more earnest, and he spoke rapidly. Whatever he had to say evidently held the unknown's attention, for he watched the speaker closely.

All this puzzled Brooklyn Ben still more. He had supposed that Ned had come to meet some one whom he knew, but the men had met as entire strangers. Were they really such, or only playing a part?

Ben did not like the flashy man. Either that person had very poor judgment as to wearing apparel, and a deceptive face, or he was not a good citizen. He looked like a sharper, and Ben was ready to believe him a gambler, "confidence man," or something of that kind.

The disguised detective remained as indifferent, outwardly, as ever.

Ned continued speaking, and a change came over his companion's face. He frowned, and seemed to find something unpleasant in the subject. When he had a chance to speak he did so with evident curtness.

It was at this moment that two men near Ben began a conversation which the latter found interesting.

"Who is that with Exlon Blair?" asked one.

"Don't know him," was the reply.

"He looks like a sailor."

"Yes."

"Some blockhead Exlon is planning to pluck, I suppose."

"Exlon don't look pleased. I rather suspect that the sailor is saying something which our friend don't like."

"Possibly you are right."

"I wouldn't mind seeing Blair catch a Tartar, he usually has such good luck. Whatever is up, he is really annoyed now. Perhaps the sailor has been plucked, and has found out who did it."

Ben saw that the men were looking directly at Ned, and there could be no question to whom they referred. The flashy man was more plainly revealed. He was named Exlon Blair, and it was plain that he was some sort of a sharper.

"Fine company for Ned Chester to be in!" thought Ben. "I always s'posed he was a right good sort of chap, but he don't seem to run with others of that sort. Wonder what his business is with Blair?"

The latter and Ned were still talking earnest-

ly. Blair was angry about something. It showed in his expression and manner, and his answers to the sailor did not seem pleasant. Ben grew anxious to overhear what they were saying, and determined to gratify that wish.

He left his chair and moved nearer to the two men by a circuitous route, and then sat down near them, taking care not to look directly at them at all.

He was able to hear fairly well then. Ned was speaking.

"There is no use of denial," he declared; "I am sure that you have it, and as it is now useless to all, I ask you to refund it without more talk."

"I have nothing to refund," answered Blair.

"Have you given it back?"

"I never had it to give back."

"Why will you persist in saying this?" irritably demanded Ned. "I tell you, I saw the whole affair."

"You didn't see me."

"What?"

"You are mistaken in the person."

"It took you a long while to think up that lie!"

"Be careful, sir," warned Blair, angrily.

"Be careful, yourself!" retorted Ned. "You are not dealing with a man whom you can trifle with. I've seen as much wild life as you have, and have learned to hoe my own row. I know how to deal with all sorts of men. You had better come to time at once."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then I shall go to the police."

"Gently, my young friend. Is there no other story to tell the police? Franklin Damon was nearly murdered last night. Who did it?"

Blair leaned forward and looked keenly at Ned.

"I don't know," the sailor answered.

"Who would gain by his death? His heir. Who is his heir? You! Who quarreled with him? You?"

"What of it?"

"Were I a policeman, I would shadow you, sir."

"Nonsense!" replied Ned, with perceptible irritation.

"There are worse things than my small offense, as you may find when an arrest is made for the assault."

"You talk rubbish," Ned retorted.

"Perhaps."

"That don't answer me. Will you refund what I asked for?"

Blair's face assumed a speculative look.

"What's it worth?" he asked.

"One hundred dollars."

"Make it five—"

"Not a cent over one hundred!"

Ned spoke with emphasis not to be mistaken, and Blair plainly saw how foolish it would be to urge him further. The sharper leaned back in his chair and seemed to meditate. Brooklyn Ben had a pair of keen eyes, and he was almost sure that there was mischief in Blair's mind.

"I'd as soon trust a rattlesnake as him," the boy thought.

Blair finally aroused.

"I suppose that half a loaf is better than none," he observed. "Come to my room and we will soon settle it."

"Where do you live?"

"On Rivington street."

"I'll go at once."

Ned arose, and Blair promptly followed his example. The temporary cloud seemed to have passed away, and peace to have been restored, but Brooklyn Ben felt an uneasiness from which Ned was free. In the boy's opinion Exlon Blair was not a man to be trusted, and he was afraid that Ned would not be safe while in such company.

The two men arose and started for the side door, while the disguised detective walked toward the front entrance. Ben was more eager than ever to see the end of the affair, and he followed Ned and Blair.

When he reached the street they were moving away up the Bowery, and Sloan was following a few yards in their rear. As there was no other way to do, Ben fell in behind Sloan, and the double pursuit was resumed.

Rivington street was soon reached, and the foremost men turned to the right.

On went the procession several moments, and then Blair and Ned turned and entered a narrow passage at one side. Sloan quickened his pace and followed, but when Ben arrived at the corner, he halted.

He saw a long, gloomy-looking alley, which was only poorly lighted by a single, dilapidated lamp in an a lantern-like box by an equally

dilapidated door; but there was no sign of any of the men who had preceded him.

Ben stood in doubt and uneasiness. He was surprised to know that Ned would go there with Blair. The latter had said that he lived on Rivington street, but this alley was certainly not that street or any other.

It looked like a dangerous place. For a moment Ben hesitated, but he remembered Sloan and determined to go on. That was the only way to see the end of the affair.

Quickly he moved along the alley, ever ready to flee at any sign of danger. When he reached the old door he saw that the alley led somewhat further, and ended in a nest of old wooden shanties. He kept on for a few feet and then again halted. The darkness and the character of the place dampened his detective ardor.

At that moment a hand was unexpectedly laid upon his arm. He barely avoided a cry of alarm, but Sloan's well-known voice reassured him.

"Who are you?" the detective asked.

"I'm a boy."

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking around."

"What is your object?"

"Curiosity."

"I should say so! Ben Hamlin, you have followed me all the way from Brooklyn."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the boy.

"Don't be alarmed; I am not sure but you and I may yet be friends. How is your courage?"

"Good!" was the prompt reply.

"You know as well as I do that Ned Chester and another man—"

"Exlon Blair."

"Ah! is that his name? I did not know. Who is he?"

"I don't know; I only caught the name."

"Never mind. We can't stop to talk on that point, and you know so much already that I am going to trust you further. Blair and Chester have gone into one of these rookeries, and the former has turned the key upon us. Now, I want to go in, too, but I can't do it. The only means of entrance is by the window up there, and only a boy can climb to that point. How is it, young man, will you go in through the window, descend, unlock the door and admit me? Dare you risk the danger?"

CHAPTER VII.

BEN FINDS DANGEROUS COMPANY.

BROOKLYN BEN's reply was ready.

"Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it," he answered.

"But there will be danger."

"What danger?"

"That I don't know, but I am convinced that whoever live in that house are not honest persons. I hope that when you get in you can find your way to the door, unlock it and let me in without being seen, but there is no certainty of that; you may run right upon an enemy. I give you fair warning, and it is for you to decide."

"I'll go."

"All right, my boy; I glory in your courage, and I don't think there will be any trouble. Let me show you how to get up. Here is a wooden waste-water-pipe, and if you are a good climber you can ascend to the roof of the lower shanty. Once there, the window of the big one will be within your reach."

"The big one," as Sloan called it, was an old-fashioned three-story house. It had kept pace with time; it was ugly, dilapidated and rickety; but looked as though it might give shelter to quite a colony of human beings, such as they were.

Ben lost no time. He grasped the water-spout and began to climb. What would have been impossible to Sloan was not very difficult to Ben. He went up steadily, and soon reached the roof of the lower building. In front of him was the window, with nothing visible beyond but darkness.

It was not a pleasant prospect to enter, but he was somewhat proud of being asked to aid Sloan, and would not retreat. He tried the window; it raised easily, and as the room beyond seemed vacant, he entered. A slight collision with a chair gave him momentary alarm, but he decided that the sound had not been heard. Moving forward with all possible caution he passed into the hall, but misfortune came to him abruptly.

He found himself then in the grasp of a man, and all his struggles were in vain.

He was dragged into still another room, where he saw that his captor was a ragged, dirt-covered old man. The latter questioned him sharply,

but, not being pleased with the answers, uncere-
moniously dragged him to a third room.

All this had occurred so rapidly that Ben was
confused, and, coming from the miserably-fur-
nished den beyond, he was now dazzled by the
scene of splendor revealed to him.

A rich carpet covered the floor; a piano stood
at one side; all the furniture was elegant; and
the gas shone through globes of several different
colors. The room was grander than wealthy
Franklin Damon's parlor, and the rest of the
house was the scene of poverty, squalor and
wretchedness.

Ben was amazed, and did not at first notice a
man who reclined on the luxurious sofa, but he
was given little time to look.

"Captain," cried the boy's enemy, "here is a
sneakin' spy I've took. He came in by a winder
an' he means mischief."

"No, I don't," declared Ben.

"Who is he?" asked the captain.

"Don't know; he ain't the sort that lives
around here. He's a sneakin' spy, an' that's all
I know."

"I ain't nothing of the kind," persisted Ben.

"What's your name?" asked the captain.

"Sam Woods."

"He tol' me Tom Woods?" shrilly interrupted
the old man.

"Humph!"

The captain sat up. He was a tall, rather
handsome man, with a powerful face and cruel
mouth. His eyes looked uncommonly keen as he
looked at Ben.

"Boy," he said, severely, "if you have a truth-
ful story to tell, let me hear it at once."

"The long and short of it is," explained our
hero, "I'm homeless, and I came in thinking to
find a place to sleep."

"Did you see the sheds outside?"

"Yes, but they didn't look water-tight."

"You are too particular for a genuine tramp.
Which window did he come in at, Uriah?"

"The one over the east door."

"And he expects us to believe his yarn! A
man, nor boy, don't take such a climb merely
for shelter when shanties are near at hand. The
boy is a spy."

"What shall I do with him, cap'n?"

"Hold him prisoner. He looks as though he
would make a good cabin-boy."

This expression puzzled Ben, but he was not
given much time to think about it.

"Tie him up and plaut him over in yonder
corner," added the captain.

Ben remonstrated, but all in vain. He was
tied securely, not only in the plain sense of the
word, but, after his hands and feet were attend-
ed to, he was secured to one leg of the piano.
Uriah and the captain then consulted. Ben
could hear but little that was said, but he man-
aged to make out that something was about to
be done in the room; that Uriah advised his re-
moval, but the captain was in favor of letting
the prisoner see and hear all—why, was not
plain.

The matter was soon settled, and Uriah went
out of the room. The captor then donned a
mask which completely concealed his face. Ben
looked on in wonder.

There was a brief lull, and then the door re-
opened and five men entered. All but one were
masked like the captain. The single exception
was a young, dissipated-looking man in the
dress of a sailor. Ben was at a loss to decide
whether he was there willingly, but this point
was soon settled.

The new-comers faced the captain, and that
person addressed the unmasked man:

"Your name?"

"Alf Tomney," was the ready reply.

"How long have you been a sailor?"

"Goin' on ten year."

"Are you a bold man?"

"I claim to be."

"How is your conscience?"

"Don't know that I have one."

"Do you want to get rich?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"I don't care what way."

"Well said, my man, but don't be too precipi-
tate. There is hazardous work ahead for all of
us, and I warn you that danger must be met
bravely. We all take our lives in our hands and
risk them on the cast of a die. You have been
duly warned as to this by my aids, I suppose.
Now, dare you face it?"

"Yes," was the unhesitating reply.

"Some of us will surely die in the venture."

"I will take my chances."

"Have you been warned that the initiation is
very severe?"

"Yes."

"Our recruits are required to go through a
terrible ordeal," the captain proceeded, in a
hard voice, "and only one-half survive it.
Those who do survive are truly heroes. Two
new recruits are placed face to face, each with a
revolver in his hand. One revolver is loaded
with cartridges which never miss fire; the other
is loaded with blank cartridges. The new re-
cruits are compelled to aim at one another's
breasts and fire. One remains unhurt, the other
falls lifeless."

The sailor showed slight signs of emotion, but
he firmly answered:

"I have heard of this."

"And you dare risk it?"

"Yes."

The captain grasped his hand.

"Young man, I admire your courage and hope
you will come out of it alive. It shall be de-
cided at once. Uriah, bring in the other man,
and let us see which is to live through the test of
valor!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BRICK VAULT.

ONE of the masked men shuffled out of the
room, while Brooklyn Ben looked on with grow-
ing interest which was now less pleasant than
ever. If he had felt any doubt as to the character
of his companions it was by this time gone.
They were desperate men who would hesitate at
no crime.

A large oil-cloth was spread upon the floor,
and the captain kindly explained that it was to
keep the slain man from soiling the carpet. The
sailor shut his lips and maintained dogged si-
lence.

A second man was brought in. He was a
coarse-featured, brutal-looking fellow, and seem-
ed less at ease than his predecessor. Looking
restlessly around he muttered to himself in an
unintelligible way.

Two revolvers were produced by the masked
men, and two boxes of cartridges. They ex-
plained that one was blank and one "deadly."
They experimented, and the "deadly" variety
put a lump of lead through a board. Both re-
volvers were soon loaded, and the new recruits
were then made the focus of every glance.

"Do either of you want to back out?" asked
the captain, bluffly.

"I don't," declared the second recruit, sharp-
ly.

"Nor I," said the first, firmly.

"Remember 't is sure death to one of you."

"Never mind."

"Go on!"

Thus replied the candidates, and the captain
motioned to the oil-cloth. They took their places.
The two revolvers were concealed for a time,
and then the sailor was given his choice. He
made it quickly.

"Now get ready," ordered the captain. "I
shall count from one to three; at the last word
you are to fire together. I wish both of you
could escape, for you are brave men, but one
must die. Let me shake hands with both of
you."

He did so, while Brooklyn Ben looked on with
cold shivers chasing each other along his spine.

"Now, then, all ready for the great event,"
added the captain. "Cover each other!"

They did so. Each presented his revolver at
the breast of his adversary.

"Now for the last act. Remember to fire at
the word. One! Two! Three!"

A double report followed. Ben Hamlin leaped
up nervously, only to be jerked back by his
bonds. But there was no fall; both men remain-
ed standing. The second of the two smiled.
Then the captain stepped forward to the sailor.

"Bravo, young man!" he said. "You have
proved yourself a good one. I will now say that
both revolvers were loaded with blank cart-
ridges, but it was a trial of your pluck just the
same. Your opponent is one of my old men.
You are now fully initiated, and I am glad to
welcome you to the fold."

Once more he shook the sailor's hand, and the
latter tried to act at ease, but his face was
pale.

"Bear one thing in mind," continued the
leader; "though there has been no blood shed
here, we are not joking men. We have not
played on your fears; we have simply tested
your courage. The work in which we are to
engage is desperate, dangerous work. Whether
we succeed or fail, New York and the whole
civilized world will ring with the exploit, and it
may send us to the gallows. Yet, we are not
Socialists, Anarchists or murderers, and we
shall not deal in dynamite—not by a good deal.
Our plan is as unusual to New York as it is bold,
hazardous and promising of great wealth."

"I am with you," said the sailor, heartily.

"Good! Mix with the men, and you shall be
told all in due time."

A rap sounded at the door, and Uriah opened
it. He talked for a few moments in a subdued
voice, and then called the captain. Another
consultation followed; then the leader returned.

"Something is wrong," he said, looking at
Brooklyn Ben. "The men announce another
capture, and it seems we are really beset by
foes. Uriah, give our new member a mask: let
no one show his face here."

"You'd better kill all the blamed spies,"
growled Uriah.

"Perhaps I will."

"Nothin' is ever gained with sneaks."

"We'll fix 'em when we get them on board the
vessel."

"Ef they don't fix us, before then."

"We won't give them a chance."

"That boy looks slippery," and Uriah gazed
at Ben through the apertures in his mask in a
way far from friendly.

"You can use the 'cat' on him when he has
blossomed out as a cabin boy."

A rap again sounded at the door, and the cap-
tain bade the applicant come in. Entered three
men, two of whom were masked, while the third,
bound securely, walked between them as a
prisoner.

This man gave Ben a fresh start—it was Ned
Chester! The young man had evidently seen
hard times. His clothing was disordered, and
there was a slight cut on one temple. Prisoner
that he was, he faced the masked men boldly.

"Here," explained the captain, "we have a
party who has thought fit to act as a spy. He
is now before us for judgment. Number Twelve,
tell your story."

One of the masked men answered, and Ben
recognized the voice of Exlon Blair.

"The prisoner is named Chester," he ex-
plained. "He came to me and said that he had
been prowling around the city some, and had
got track of our organization. He offered me
twenty-five dollars to betray the whole snap. It
seems he knew next to nothing, but he wanted
to learn more, and then blow on us."

There was a fierce murmur from the masked
men, but Ned faced them in scornful silence.

"Why did you bring him here?"

"I saw that he had got to be silenced at once,
and as there was no other way, I decoyed him
here where we could attend to him—and save
ourselves."

"You have done well, Number Twelve, and I
thank you in the name of the organization.
Now, men, there are two courses for us to pur-
sue in regard to our prisoner. We can keep
him under lock and key until we are ready for
action, and then make him one of us; or we can
—end his career at once!"

"That's the sort—kill him!" cried Uriah.

A general murmur of approval arose from the
men.

"Prisoner," continued the captain, "what
have you to say for yourself?"

"Not a word!" Ned boldly replied.

"How's that?" exclaimed the captain.

"All I have to say is that your esteemed
brother, the Reverend Mr. Number Twelve—or
whatever you call him; I call him Exlon Blair
—is an infernal liar. Not one word of his state-
ment is true. I was not decoyed here to see you;
I never asked him to betray you; I never heard
of you until this evening; and I don't know who
you are, anyway."

"A cunning lie," commented Blair.

"A stupid lie, you mean," added the captain.

"Just so."

"Hear the parrot!" scornfully cried Ned.

"He will echo all you say, and he will stick to
his lie. Well, gents, I don't know that I can
persuade you, so you will have to do with me as
you see fit. Drive on your machine!"

"By Mars! I rather hate to kill so bold a fel-
low."

"He's all the more dang'rous," expostulated
Uriah.

The captain meditated, but Ned did not show
the least sign of uneasiness. He looked at the
masked men with a cool, satirical smile.

"You are an interesting-looking gang, I must
say," he observed. "What have you done to
make you so ashamed of yourselves? I don't
doubt that you are a set of sneaks, but why ad-
vertise it so plainly? Perhaps you think that
you look grim, dangerous and awful in your
black night-caps. You do not; you simply
look absurd. I suspect you are only a lot of old
women."

This sarcasm was not thrown away. It an-
gered the masked men, and they vented their
anger in savage mutterings. Uriah appealed to

the captain to "give them a chance at the prisoner," but the request was not heeded.

Ned's gaze wandered and he saw Brooklyn Ben. The discovery was plainly a great surprise to him, but he controlled his face as much as possible, and looked away again. That he was greatly puzzled to account for Ben's presence there was plain, and, if the truth had been known, he was worried far more about the boy than about himself.

"I suppose the safest way is the best," the captain finally observed, "and I will listen to your voices, men. Bring on the prisoners, and we will soon dispose of them."

Ben was released from the piano, and he and Ned were conducted from the room and, afterward, down two pairs of stairs. This brought them to the cellar. The captain evidently had a definite plan in view, for he led the way to one side where was a brick wall, not yet finished, with the masons' material still scattered around. At one point there was a place like a huge oven, some six feet square, and at a word from the leader Ben and Ned were thrust inside.

"Wall them in!" added the captain.

Ben looked quickly around. The only opening in the tomb-like place was that through which they had been put in, and their enemies seized trowels, plunged them into the mortar, and began to lay bricks to close the opening.

The prisoners were to be buried alive!

"Look here; I won't stand this!" cried Ned.

He started forward, but the captain drew a revolver and pointed at his breast.

"Stand back!" he ordered, "you've got to stay where we put you. Stand back or I will settle you, right off!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHADOW OF SUSPICION.

ALL was quiet at Franklin Damon's house, but it was a painful, funereal silence that hung over the place. The master of the house had not changed in the least during the twelve hours which had elapsed since he was discovered in such a lamentable condition. Not for a moment had he recovered consciousness, but the hopes of his physicians—one of whom remained with him all the time—had grown a little stronger. There had been danger that the wounded man would sink and expire, but he had held his own bravely.

Silence reigned in the house, and the servants came and went like shadows.

The attending physicians were somewhat surprised that Rosalthe had not offered to aid in the sick-room, but the necessity of that was past; a trained nurse had been secured, and the men of medicine no longer wished to see a young girl attempt to perform any work there.

The "cuckoo-clock" in Rosalthe's room struck nine. She glanced at the time-piece, and then arose and went into the hall. She had some object in view, but circumstances deferred it. She had barely reached the hall when she was accosted by an old man.

This was Samuel Eagan, the bookkeeper.

Eagan had been many years in the service of the Damons. He had served three generations faithfully, and had grown old in their business house. Before the death of Franklin Damon's father, Eagan had been taken into the home of the family, and by the terms of the master's will he was to have refuge there while he lived. He was a plain, honest man, quite intelligent in his way, but far from quick-witted.

He now accosted the young lady with grave respect, saying that he would like to speak with her. They entered the room, and he began. He first referred to Damon's illness, and seemed ill at ease, but finally came to the point he clearly wished to reach.

"I have been in the service of your family almost sixty years, Miss Rosalthe," he said, earnestly. "I served John Adams Damon; I served his son, Templeton Damon; I have served his grandson, Franklin Damon. The family name is as dear to me as my life—it would kill me to see it disgraced."

The old man's voice faltered, while Rosalthe was manifestly ill at ease. She nervously replied:

"I am in a hurry, Mr. Eagan—will you kindly hasten on with what you have to say?"

"I am not wholly ignorant of what occurred here last night," proceeded the bookkeeper, his voice trembling.

"Go on!"

"I saw you in the hall."

"Well?" whispered Rosalthe, after a perceptible start.

"I saw you speak with Franklin Damon."

"Well?"

Rosalthe's color was deserting her face.

"I am just as sure as that I live that Mr. Damon voluntarily admitted to his room whoever dealt him those terrible blows. I heard you say to him that you wanted to speak with him."

"Yes?"

"I did not see more. I did not suppose any thing unusual was indicated by what I did see, but it occurs to me that it would be natural for your guardian to ask you into his room if he wished to speak with you. The hour was then late; too late for him to receive visitors not members of his own family; and I can't help feeling that he did receive no visitor after you. Perhaps I should have thought nothing strange had you come forward to care for him. You did not do so; you avoided entering his room; and your manner has been very odd. I can't help thinking that something is wrong."

The old bookkeeper no longer looked at the floor. His gaze was bent full upon Rosalthe's face, and his expression was a mixture of sternness and sorrow.

"What am I to understand by this?" asked the girl, almost in a whisper.

"Heaven help us! I cannot but feel that you know more about the assault than the rest of us do."

"Do you accuse me?"

"How am I to know? Great heavens! how am I to know? I am miserable and heart-broken!"

Eagan wrung his hands piteously.

"Why should I injure Franklin Damon?" she asked.

"I don't know; I don't know that you did injure him; but, if you know *who* the criminal was, in pity's name tell all at once! You are a Damon, and I have loved you next to Mr. Franklin—the noblest of men. Speak out, Miss Rosalthe—*speak out!*"

The old man clasped his thin hands and looked at his companion beseechingly.

He did not receive any encouragement. Rosalthe's usually gentle face was hard and cold. She believed that she knew the worst now, and was not inclined to aid Eagan in any way. She drew a deep breath which was one of relief, and there was method in her answer.

"Mr. Eagan, you surprise me greatly. I have thought you my friend—"

"I was—I am!"

"And you accuse me of trying to commit murder!"

"No, no; I do not accuse *you*—that is, I am not sure—" He came to a stop, hesitated and added: "I thought perhaps you could tell *who* did it."

"I should be angry with you, Mr. Eagan, if you were not such an old friend; but I dare say you mean well. Your ideas are absurd, however. Would I be a party to any act of violence against Franklin Damon, or any one else? Heaven forbid!"

The old bookkeeper did not answer, but his thin hands trembled more than ever, and his face was downcast.

"Of course," pursued Rosalthe, "the crime was committed by some professional villain, if I may use the expression—a burglar, or something of that sort. How he entered I don't know, but such men are very cunning. Why he did not steal anything I can't say; a dozen things may have happened to prevent. All we can do, Mr. Eagan, is to leave it to the police. They will solve the mystery, and if we meddle, we shall ruin all. Good-evening!"

She had arisen; she now bowed to him and left the room quietly.

Eagan looked after her in doubt and sorrow.

"She didn't explain as I hoped," he muttered; "she didn't declare her innocence as a guiltless person ought. Great heavens! *can* it be that she was concerned in the attempt to kill Franklin Damon?"

And Rosalthe, moving swiftly along the hall, was at that moment thinking:

"He suspects me! He sees that something is wrong. If that simple-minded old man of fourscore years can see so plainly, how will it be with the shrewd detectives? I don't believe that I could endure such an interview with them; I think I should break down and confess all."

She came to a sudden, nervous start, as Percy Grayson accosted her.

"Whither so fast, Rosalthe?" he asked pleasantly.

"Nowhere, in particular," she answered.

"Were you looking for Ned Chester?"

"No, sir; I was not," was the curt response.

"He has not returned."

Rosalthe did not answer.

"It seems to me," continued Grayson, "that Ned is indiscreet to act so at this crisis. He may

bring suspicion upon himself. You ought to reason with him."

"He is his own master."

"But likely to be master of this house soon—thanks to the 'lottery of assassination.'"

"You can talk with him if you wish."

"I am not in his confidence in this affair."

"What affair?"

"The assault upon our uncle."

"Percy Grayson, how dare you insinuate—"

"Wait, Rosalthe; let us speak calmly. We talked on this subject this morning, and I gave you an inkling of what I know. I saw you and Ned in the hall last night, which proves conclusively that he was here. You said that he had no key, which proves that he was admitted by some one. Who did it, if not you?"

"I did not," interrupted Rosalthe.

"So much the worse for him. He did not come to see you—why did he come? Look for the answer in the quarrel he had with Uncle Franklin, and the present condition of the latter."

"You coward! how dare you accuse Ned—"

"Because I believe him guilty, and so do you!" retorted Grayson. "Deny it as you will, it is a plain case. You believe—perhaps know—that he is guilty, yet you would screen him. Well, he shall be screened if you are wise."

"If I am wise!" repeated Rosalthe, mechanically.

"Yes. Do you know what I mean?"

"I don't want to know."

"You must!"

Grayson caught her wrist and flashed a quick glance around to make sure they were not observed.

"Rosalthe," he impetuously added, "Ned Chester shall go unsuspected if you say the word. I love you! Be my wife, and my lips shall forever be sealed. It is for you to say whether Franklin Damon's assassin shall be known."

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERY OF LOIS.

ROSALTHE looked at Grayson with the utmost horror on her face. She had never liked him, but his presence had not been offensive until this affair occurred. Now he made his proposal with Franklin Damon lying at the point of death only a few yards away, and with the atmosphere of gloom over the whole house; and the proposal was, in itself, a crime. He knew that she cared for Ned, yet would buy her, if he could, at the expense of hiding a greater crime.

"Let me go!" she cried, trying to free her wrist.

"I am not answered," he replied, steadily.

"I can't answer now."

"Why not?"

"This is no time—"

"It is the best of times."

"Give me a week."

"Impossible! This is the day and the hour. Listen to me, Rosalthe! I would not be cruel to you for my life, but I love you; I must have you for my own. Tell me you will marry me."

"I will not! I say, no—a thousand times, No!"

Grayson tightened his grasp and bent toward her.

"And I say—*yes!*" he said, in a whisper.

"Let me go, Percy Grayson!"

"I will, but you must hear me first. Since you are so confused I will give you twenty-four hours to think of it, but bear one thing in mind: There are but two ways in this case. Either you marry me, or Sloan, the detective, shall speedily know all about Chester. Choose your own course. Good-night!"

Dropping her hand he turned and walked abruptly away. Nothing in the late scene troubled his conscience. He had thrown off the mask, and, regarding himself as a sure victor, he walked with a firm step and with his head thrown well back.

Had he looked around he would have seen Rosalthe looking after him with an expression which might well have touched the hardest heart. She was hopeless and in despair, and her face reflected these emotions. The burden she was bearing was heavy for her young shoulders.

Grayson disappeared, but she lingered several minutes in the hall. When she went away it was to return to her own room. Once there she sat down to meditate on her position, but this proved so productive of mental pain that she determined not to be alone. She rung for her maid, and Lois came promptly.

Until that fatal day dawned the brightest face in the house had been that of the pretty French girl, but it was bright no longer. She came in

looking so sober and gloomy that Rosalthe was tempted to reprove her for it. Instead, she said she had a headache, and directed Lois to comb her hair thoroughly. It was the best excuse she could think of for having her there.

"Have you heard anything new, Lois?" she asked.

"No, miss."

"The detective has not been here again, has he?"

"No, miss."

"Isn't that odd?"

"I don't know, miss."

Rosalthe made an impatient movement.

"Don't answer me like a machine. I want you to talk; I am lonesome and melancholy. Say something!"

"What shall I say?"

"Something which I don't tell you to say; I can't talk for both of us. What do the servants say? What is their theory in regard to how Mr. Damon was injured?"

"I haven't heard them say, Miss Rosalthe; but they all agree it was terrible, and they pity Mr. Damon."

"But they don't give any theories?"

"I haven't heard any."

A short silence followed. If Rosalthe had seen Lois's face she might have suspected that the maid was not telling all she knew, and was determined not to tell. It was Lois who spoke next.

"Do you think they will catch the man?"

"I don't know."

"I hope so."

"So do I."

Both girls spoke falsely. They did not hope anything of the kind, though they tried to make their assertions sound plausible.

"What will they do with him if they catch him?" continued Lois, after a pause.

"They will—he will be a doomed man."

"Even if Mr. Damon gets well?"

"In that case I think they will send him to prison for life," answered Rosalthe, trying to appear calm.

Lois's hands stopped a moment. She knew nothing about law; not even enough to doubt her mistress's opinion; but the idea seemed to startle her.

"They wouldn't do this if they could not prove it against him, would they?" she asked.

"Certainly not."

"Suppose no one saw it done?"

"Then it is not likely to be known at all."

The maid's lips suddenly closed with fixed determination. She had come into the room with an idea half formed in her mind; now it was fully decided upon, and her every look showed her resolution.

The hair-dressing went on, and they talked further, but both avoided the subject last discussed. Rosalthe did not succeed in getting any degree of cheerfulness from Lois, but she ascribed it to causes she could easily imagine, and did not suspect that there was anything below the surface. She found consolation in the maid's company, and suddenly said:

"You shall stay with me to-night, Lois."

"How, miss?"

"You shall sleep here. You can arrange a couch on the sofa and be quite comfortable. I don't want to be alone; I won't be alone!"

Lois had been all ready to make voluble excuses to avoid complying with the proposal, but Rosalthe's emphasis convinced her that they would be useless. The maid had plans which would be seriously interfered with by the new arrangement, but she decided to let it go on and trust to her wits afterward to make everything right.

Rosalthe's idea had been suddenly conceived, but it pleased her from the first and she grew more determined in regard to it. The bed was made on the sofa accordingly, and shortly after ten o'clock the party retired.

Lois had previously gone to her own room. What she did there Rosalthe did not know, and Lois did not explain, but when she returned she had taken one more step toward her plan. When she lay down it was with the determination not to sleep, but she lay very quiet and waited for her young mistress to lose consciousness.

It was long before she was accommodated. Rosalthe's mind was not at ease, and sleep did not come obedient to her wish. She tossed upon her bed, thought until thinking was misery, and until her nerves were in a state of revolt.

Lois waited impatiently. She was nervous, too, but she scarcely ventured to turn upon her pillow; she wanted her mistress to think her asleep; she wanted Rosalthe to lose all knowledge of what was being done in the room.

Twelve o'clock had struck, and the next hour was drawing near. Lois began to feel encouraged. The only sound from the bed was Rosalthe's heavy breathing—she had fallen asleep at last.

Lois waited a few moments longer. Then she stirred slowly and carefully. Laying aside the clothing she cautiously arose. Rosalthe did not stir. Gathering up her own garments Lois moved to the door. She unlocked it and passed out. Her mistress gave no sign of consciousness. Closing the door, Lois hurriedly completed her toilet. Then she glided to the further end of the hall.

At that point stood a small table covered with a cloth which drooped nearly to the floor. Stooping, she reached under the table and brought out a small parcel. With this in her hand she descended first to the main hall, and then to that of the basement floor, where the gas was burning dimly.

There her hat hung upon a nail. She took it down and moved toward the outer door.

Unknown to her she was at that moment observed by two pairs of eyes. Rosalthe was not then asleep; she was standing at the head of the basement stairs, looking curiously down. Who else was looking on, Lois soon knew.

There was a step behind her; she wheeled and saw Jules Lefranc. She started back with a muffled cry.

"What in the world are you doing, Lois?"

Jules demanded, in manifest surprise.

She did not answer; she could not.

"Where are you going at this hour?" he added.

"Nowhere."

"What is that bundle?"

"Nothing."

"My dear girl, why do you tremble so? What are you afraid of? I don't understand this at all. Who has sent you out at this hour?"

Lois caught at the straw.

"Miss Rosalthe," she muttered.

"What is the errand?"

"I will tell you to-morrow."

"No. Tell me now, and I will go for you."

"No, no!" hurriedly protested Lois.

Jules tried to take her hand, but she shrunk away from him.

"Lois!" he exclaimed, reprovingly.

"Let me alone!" she retorted, sharply.

"Oh, woman—woman! what are we to make of you?" murmured Jules, rolling his eyes upward. "Uncertain, coy, and hard to please. That fits it exactly. Some of them are heartless, too."

"How dare you say that when it is for you I am going away?" impetuously exclaimed the girl.

"For me?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"You understand well enough."

"Do I? Then I am a raving lunatic. But if you are going for me, where are you going?"

"Anywhere—anywhere! so that they don't find me again."

"Run away?"

"Yes."

"This is serious!" exclaimed Lefranc. "See here, my girl, I want an explanation. What does this mean?"

"Let me go; I won't talk to you!"

"Pardon me, but you must explain, my dear Lois."

"To whom?" fiercely demanded Lois. "To the whole world? Shall I go and tell them who tried to kill Franklin Damon? Shall I put the officers on the track? I know who did the deed, if they do not. Stand back, Jules, or I will tell!"

Rosalthe had made a violent start. She clung to the balusters and listened eagerly for what was to come next.

CHAPTER XI.

BEN AND THE TROWEL.

"I'm afraid we are in for our last adventure!"

The speaker was Ned Chester. The mouth of the vault had been entirely closed up by their enemies, under the lead of the unknown "captain," and the process of burying them alive had been fully completed. The last gleam of light had been shut out; the desperadoes had vanished from sight behind the brick wall, and the last clink of the trowels had ceased to be heard.

Ned and Brooklyn Ben, still bound, were left in the living tomb.

"I hope it ain't as bad as that," Ben answered, with singular cheerfulness.

"My poor boy! I see you don't understand. Those men have doomed us to death."

"I know it."

"And we are helpless. We are bound, and, even if we were not, we could not break out. We have nothing better than our pocket-knives, and they are useless."

"Looks bad, that's a fact."

"It does, indeed."

"They want us to starve, I suppose."

"I don't think we shall starve."

"No?"

"There is another foe at our heels, and I think he will claim us first. We are in a very small room which, beyond question, is air-tight. For a while we shall get along all right, but, if I know anything about the principles of air, we shall by and by exhaust all there is here, and then slow suffocation will follow. I may be wrong as to this—I hope I am—but such is my opinion."

"I don't intend to be suffocated," Ben declared.

"What can you do?"

"Dig out!"

"Dig out! And how will you do it?"

"We ain't quite so bad off as you think," Ben bravely responded. "I thought of all this when they put us in, and I took measures to meet the storm. Do you hear that?"

He kicked something, and a "clink" followed.

"What is it?" Ned asked.

"A trowel."

"How did it get here?"

"I put it here. When they shoved us into this oven I saw it lying right in the gap, and I pushed it inside with my foot. Now we have it ready for use."

"Your foresight was admirable, Ben, but I doubt if it will help us any. We are bound you know."

"We'll get out of these ropes."

"Even if we do, there is not one chance in a hundred that we can dig out with the trowel. Such an implement will lay bricks, but when it comes to forcing them out of a solid wall, it is, I must say, next to impossible—nay, I believe it is impossible in the full sense of the word."

"Now see here, Ned Chester, that ain't the way for a sailor-chap to talk. 'Never say die' ought to be your motto; it is mine. We can't lose anything by trying, and I am going to get out of these strings and get to work."

"Bravo, Ben! you have the true spirit, and I am foolish to oppose you. If we have only one chance we will make the most of that one. Let's begin work at once, and if it is possible to make a break, we'll do it."

"That's the sort. I don't believe we were made to be smothered in an oven, nor kept on short feed until our bones get outside our skin—not much! Now, Ned, you come and stand beside me, with your back against my right side, and then run your hands into my trousers-pocket and get my knife."

Ben was coming to the front as bold, strong natures will in emergencies, and Chester followed his directions without a murmur. The knife was secured at the expense of some pain to Ned's wrists, and then the next step was taken. Ned held the knife, and Ben proceeded to saw his hands against the edge of the open blade. He expected more than one cut, but luck was with him, and the operation was accomplished without much trouble.

In a short time both were free from bonds.

"Now for the trowel!" exclaimed Ben.

He seized the implement at once and moved to the newly-laid part of the wall. Nothing but the strong hopes of youth, or the desperation of misery, could have found hope there, Ben, overlooking the impediment of darkness, as he did all others, attacked the fresh mortar with the point of the trowel.

Ned Chester shook his head. To him it seemed simply impossible to dislodge the first brick.

"Shan't I do the work?" he asked.

"I'd rather you wouldn't, Ned. This is my plan, and I want to show you it is sensible."

"You have a brave heart, my boy—of such material are heroes made. Work on, but don't break the trowel."

"You bet I won't."

Chester sat down on the floor. He could see nothing that was going on, but his lack of faith made this unimportant. He had two or three matches in his pocket, but their light would be too brief to do any good, and he did not care to waste them.

Ben indulged in no gloomy thoughts. He was determined to get out of the vault, and that was all there was to it.

He relied principally upon the fact that the

mortar between the bricks was soft, but he had used his eyes when the wall was going up, and knew that the work was poorly done. None of the bricklayers had been masons, and they had worked clumsily and used more mortar than was necessary.

This was in Ben's favor.

Having found one particular brick, he gave all his attention to dislodging it. He removed all the mortar possible, and then began to pry it toward him, carefully using the point of the trowel first on one side, and then on the other.

For a long time there was no perceptible movement of the brick, but he kept at work stubbornly. It was the one chance, and could not be neglected.

"I've seen something of life and adventure," observed Ned, "and I don't think I'm a coward, but I object to this way of going out of the world. I never harmed a human being in my life out of willfulness, and my anger burns strong against these villains. And to think that we can never bring them to justice."

Ben saw that Ned had too little faith in the attempt to escape to keep his mind on the work.

"I wonder you came here," the boy answered.

"I was trapped."

"Who did it?"

"Never mind."

Ned answered with considerable irritation. There was a short silence, and then he abruptly added:

"By the way, how in the world did you get here, Ben?"

"Perhaps I flew," was the ready reply, for Ben did not propose to give confidence where none was given him.

Ned hardly noticed the reply; his mind was back again with the desperadoes.

Ten minutes passed, and then Ben turned quietly around and approached his companion.

"See what you call that," he said.

Chester held out his hand, and some heavy substance was laid in it.

"What's this?" he asked, quickly. "A brick! Ben, you don't mean to say—"

"I mean to say I've got one brick from the wall."

Ned sprang to his feet.

"And I have been sitting here like a dunce. Boy, you have taught me a lesson; there is always hope while there is life. I am ashamed of myself—and I a sailor, too! One brick out? Why, that means escape. The worst is over, and we certainly can break through now. Give me the trowel."

Down on his knees went the young man, and he attacked the wall as vigorously as he dared. As he had said, the worst was over. The removal of the first brick left a hole which weakened the hold of the other bricks, and with only soft mortar in the way their chances looked far brighter. He worked systematically, and dislodged the bricks one after another. At the end of half an hour he had made an opening entirely through the wall, and fresh air came in most agreeably.

Progress became rapid, and they finally had an open way. They crawled through, and were clear of the living tomb.

Not yet were they at liberty, however; they were in the cellar, and Ned's previous observations had shown him that there was only one way out. This was up the stairs—up to where their enemies reigned and ruled.

The situation was discussed, and it was agreed that there was only one way to act; they must go on, and meet whatever dangers were in the way, and Ned freely admitted that such danger was great.

The only thing in their favor was the fact that the hour was growing late; the desperadoes might be asleep.

Ben did not think it best to mention Detective Sloan, but he wondered what had become of him. He had, of course, grown tired of waiting long before. Had he left the vicinity, or made an effort to enter?

"We'll go on," said Chester, "and trust to luck. Are you ready, Ben?"

"Yes."

"Then follow me."

They crept up the rickety stairs. At the top they paused and listened. No sound reached their ears. Ned slowly opened the door. All was dark and silent beyond. He turned and whispered to Ben.

"I think they have gone to bed, and as I believe I have an idea where the door is, we will creep carefully forward and find our way out. Be very careful not to run upon a chair, or any other piece of furniture that will make a racket."

Ben answered tersely, and then Ned led the

way once more. Along the floor they stole lightly, but it was old and uneven, and some of the boards creaked under their feet. Ned thought that he was using all possible caution, but there was one thing for which he was not prepared. He had his hands held well forward, but there was a trap for his feet which his hands did not find.

Suddenly his toe struck against some object.

He pitched forward and fell heavily.

The obstacle which had prostrated him stirred suddenly, and revealed itself as a man.

This person started up with a wild exclamation.

Brooklyn Ben was startled, but it occurred to him that the only hope now lay in haste. He sprang forward. He heard a stir on all sides of him, and knew that a number of men had been sleeping on the floor.

The door must be found and passed before they could interfere.

What had become of Ned he did not know, but he ran forward. Another moment and he collided with some one, and then a pair of human arms closed tenaciously around him.

CHAPTER XII.

A COMPANION UNDER THE TABLE.

BROOKLYN BEN bounded like a wild animal in a snare. He was not in the least of a cowardly nature, and he hoped by prompt action to regain his liberty. He made the effort, but one painful truth was soon forced upon him; his captor was stronger than he, and struggling was of no avail.

"Get a light!" ordered a commanding voice. "I don't know what all this racket is about, but I will know or tear down the old house. Hang it! the very blue ruin seems let loose to-night. Hurry up that light!"

"Can't find the lamp," responded a voice. "It's in the next room," explained another man.

"Go for it at once."

Ben braced himself for another effort. He must get away before the light was produced, or not at all. Suddenly he moved. With an agile twist and squirm he escaped his captor's hold, and then moved away. He had lost all idea of direction, and, as the sequel proved, went wrong. He had gone but a few paces when he found himself in a corner, and nearly fell over a table.

He paused irresolutely.

At that moment a light flamed up in the next room. Discovery was near at hand. He acted upon first impulse, and, having discovered that the table was covered with a cloth which fell nearly to the floor, promptly crawled under it.

"Hurry up with the light!" ordered the leader of the gang.

Ben changed his position slightly and his hand was placed upon a shoe. The shoe at once moved. Ben recoiled; he was not the only occupant of this hiding-place; there was another person under the table.

The boy was startled, but no time was given him to investigate. The lamp was brought into the room. It was a miserable, dirt-covered affair which gave only a faint light; so faint that when Ben tried to make out who his immediate companion was, he could see nothing but the outline of a human form. The dim light could not overcome the protecting cloth.

"Now, then, what is the racket?" demanded the captain. "Have we an interloper here?"

He held the lamp well up and looked around. He saw four men besides himself, and all were of his party.

"Are one of you on a drunken spree?" he sternly demanded.

Every man hastened to proclaim his innocence.

"Then I don't see— Ha! the outer door is open. We have had another infernal spy in here, and he has got away. By Judas! that is bad!"

He hastened to the door and looked out, but saw nothing. He reclosed it, turned the key and removed it.

"This place is getting too hot for us; I believe the police are on our game, and we can't wall them all up, as we did in the case of those two young fools. What has happened here, anyway?"

His men began to explain all that they knew, but that was very little.

In the meanwhile Ben made another effort to learn more about his companion under the table, but the attempt was not a success. He could only make out that he was larger than Ned Chester, which did away with the hope that a friend might be near. But perhaps even an un-

known would prove an ally; the man would not hide thus unless he was opposed to the lawless inmates of the house.

Ben found no pleasure in his company, however; that mass of flesh wedged into the corner did not impress him as being favorable to him.

"It's clear that this place is no longer a refuge for us," said the captain, "but I'll be hanged if I am going to be driven out to-night. We'll go to sleep again."

"Hadn't we better search the house?" asked Uriah.

"It may be just as well. You and Benson go ahead. Look in every corner, and don't let even a flea escape you. If you find anybody, bring him to me dead or alive—I don't care which."

Away went the searchers, while the captain continued to growl to his followers. Brooklyn Ben could see their faces, and he did his best to impress them upon his mind.

"I hope this ain't so bad as it seems," the captain said. "If the beaks gets after us we may pull up at the Tombs any time, and our great scheme will go to the dogs. Zounds! it will be a happy day to me when I hear the water lapping the keel of our good vessel."

"The jingle of gold will not be harsh music," added one of the men.

"Right you are! Ha! won't New York shake from the Battery to Spuyten Duyvil when our daring scheme comes off. I tell you, lads, it will be the sensation of the generation. Little do these common-herd dummies of to-day dream that the spirit of old exists among them, and that the heroes of the future are plodding among them day by day, setting the snare. Ha! ha!"

"We may get into our own snare, Cap."

"No, we won't; not while I steer the concern—but we won't talk of it now."

Uriah and his companion finally returned and reported that they could find no sign of interlopers—they had not been to the cellar—and there the captain let the matter rest. Advancing the hopeful opinion that the intruders had probably been thieves, he put out the light and they lay down again.

Ben wondered what would be the end of the affair. His position was most peculiar. He was not only in the midst of his enemies, but he had a strange companion in his adventure. Who was the man under the table? He had not stirred for a long time—possibly he had gone to sleep.

Several minutes passed; the outlaws began to breathe heavily.

Then the unknown stirred, and Ben felt a hand laid upon his arm.

What was coming? Was the man a friend or a foe?

"Be still!" whispered a voice. "Don't waken those fellows."

Ben remained silent.

"Who are you, boy?" pursued his companion. "Just now, I haven't any name."

"Did it use to be 'Ben'?"

"Ha!"

"Softly, my lad; softly. I am your ally; the man who sent you in here."

"Detective Sloan?"

"Well, I don't know as there is any good in denying it. You have my secret, and I hope you will respect it."

"I will."

"Next thing is for us to get out of here. I take it that those men would kill us as quick as they would a rat, and we need to be careful. Hear my plan: They have locked the door and taken out the key, so our only way is to go upstairs and escape by the window through which you—and I, afterward—entered. We must cross this floor as still as ghosts. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Then crawl out of here cautiously, and let us try our luck at once."

Ben moved. With all the care possible he made his way beyond the table, and Sloan followed. Thus far there was no alarm. The next step would be attended with great danger. Could they cross the floor without arousing their enemies? Sloan let no time go to waste, but pressed Ben's arm and directed him to follow.

They started for the door.

It seemed to Ben that he made a good deal of noise, but he did his best. Small, indeed, was his faith. He expected to see the outlaws start up and stop him. The suspense was keenly painful. His life hung poised in the balance.

The door grew nearer, however. Foot by foot they went on. A little further and the goal would be gained—but would the enemy give them time?

Ben breathed a sigh of relief as he reached the door. Sloan had already opened it; they passed

through, and she detective closed it after them. The ascent of the stairs was begun. Here they met with no obstacle; they went ahead, and were soon at the window where Ben had entered. There Sloan paused.

"One word before we go out," he said. "Where is Chester?"

Ben explained, giving it as his opinion that Ned had escaped and gone outside.

"All right," Sloan replied. "We shall probably see him there, so let me give you a word of warning. You have stumbled upon my secret, and know who I am, but I don't want any one else to suspect. Will you remain silent, even to Chester?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Remember, now, that I trust you."

"You sha'n't have cause to be sorry. I won't tell a soul, and if you want my help again, come to me. I rather like this business."

"Then you're made of good metal. I should suppose such an adventure as this would scare any boy out of his wits."

"No boy need be scared when he's in a good cause," stoutly answered Ben.

"There is sense in that, my lad, but never mind; let us get out as soon as possible."

He shoved up the window and Ben passed out to the low roof beyond. Sloan had used an old ladder, which he hunted up, to gain this point when he entered. Ben slid to the ground, secured the ladder and made a way for the detective to descend.

"We're well out," observed the latter. "I reckon you've had a hard time, and I only escaped discovery when prowling around inside by hiding under the table. We'll go now, but, mind you! if we meet Chester, don't say a word as to who I am."

Ben promised, and they started for the street. They had barely reached it when they met Ned. His face was grave and anxious, but it cleared at sight of the boy.

"What! are you here?" he cried. "Where have you been?"

"Kicking around in the house."

"Didn't you come out when I did?"

"No; they caught me."

"And I deserted you! That is a shame, but I am not to blame. When I got to the open air I saw a boy running out of the alley, and thought it was you. I followed him several blocks before I learned my mistake; but when I did learn it I turned back to help you. I hope you don't blame me?"

"Not in the least."

"Then let's make for Brooklyn."

At this moment Ben noticed that Sloan had disappeared. Ned had not noticed that any one was with Ben, and the detective had seized the chance to get away quietly and avoid notice.

Ned and Ben started for the Bowery. Each had his secret and kept it. The latter did not mention Sloan, and Chester made no effort to explain the nature of his business with Exlon Blair which had made all this trouble.

CHAPTER XIII.

BEN'S INVESTIGATION.

ROSALTHE'S color came and went as she listened to the conversation between Lefranc and Lois. It was of intense interest to her, and she drank in every word. What was she about to hear? Lois had declared that she knew who had assaulted Franklin Damon. What knowledge did she possess?

Jules Lefranc was less excited by Lois's assertion and her demands. He still blocked the way, preventing her departure.

"You have said all this before, Lois," he answered, "and I don't like to have it repeated. My dear girl, I can't see why you want to leave the house."

"You ought to know."

"I do not."

"Can't you see," fiercely answered the girl, "that it is to keep them away from me? If I stay here they will have the secret from me, some way or other."

"Do you know what will be the result of going away?"

"I shall be safe."

"Wrong—fatally wrong! Lois, the moment they hear that one of the inmates of the house has run away, suspicion will at once fall upon that one, and every effort will be put forth to find you. Do you suppose you could evade the officers of law? No, no; you would be as helpless as a hare pursued by bloodhounds. They would run you down, sure, and then what you most fear would come to pass; they would wrest your secret from you. Believe me, you

can commit no more fatal act than to run away."

Lois dropped into a chair. She saw the force of this argument, and was no longer inclined to oppose Jules. Rosalthe listened with increasing interest. She had her theory of how Damon had been assaulted, but there was a possibility—a very small one, she thought—that she might have the wrong idea.

"It is necessary," pursued Jules, "that we all act as natural as possible. Any little circumstance may turn suspicion toward the right quarter, and we must be shrewd for Mr. Chester's sake."

Rosalthe's new hope faded away.

"Damon may not die," added Lefranc, "but if he does we want our young master to enter upon his new career without a scandal. No doubt there was great provocation for the assault. The only way to keep it quiet is for every one to go on quietly and give no ground for suspicion. Will you stay in the house, Lois?"

"Yes."

"Then go back to your room. I hope Kittie Miles did not see you leave it?"

"I slept in Miss Rosalthe's room, to-night."

"How was that?"

Lois explained, adding that Rosalthe did not suspect that she had left the room.

"Go back, then," Jules directed, "and take care not to waken her."

"I will."

Lois rose to her feet, and Rosalthe, deciding that she had barely time enough to regain her room, hurried away. If she had remained a few seconds she would have seen something of interest. A few more words passed between Lefranc and Lois, and then they prepared to separate.

"My dear girl," said he, "don't be cast down by this affair. It will all come out right, and when the clouds have rolled by we will leave the house, be married and settle down in a home of our own."

He passed his arm around her waist and bent to kiss her, but she violently released herself.

"Let me alone!" she exclaimed.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried, in wonder, "what is the matter now?"

"I am not going to have a murderer touch me!"

With this vehement declaration Lois turned and fled up-stairs leaving Jules staring after her blankly.

"St. Catherine!" he ejaculated, "has the girl gone crazy?"

Lois did not pause. She went to the second floor hall at once, secreted her package in its former place, and, very cautiously, re-entered the room of her young mistress. To all appearances Rosalthe was fast asleep, and Lois had regained her couch without having betrayed her absence.

Rosalthe, however, was awake, and her mind, like her maid's, was filled with painful thoughts. The shadows of Damon's house were shutting down darker than ever.

The following morning the physicians reported Franklin Damon's condition unchanged, except that the generally favorable physical conditions gave cause for some degree of hope. As long as there was no sign of a collapse the chances were that his bodily health would be restored. As to his mind they had no opinion to give. He might regain his senses fully after a few days, or suffer permanent injury from the blows he had received. Time alone would tell.

There seemed to be no change in the household. Lois and Lefranc were about as usual, attending to their duties, but the former took good care not to descend to the basement. She shivered whenever she thought of Jules, and wanted to keep away from him.

Ned Chester met the family at breakfast with unperturbed manner. He had come home, secured a few hours of sleep, and removed all traces of his night's adventures. No one, seeing him, would have imagined that he had so lately been walled up in a vault and left to slow death.

Brooklyn Ben was another person who had a secret and kept it well.

Just before breakfast he looked across the way and saw the disguised detective again at his post. Evidently, he had not given up his theory that Ned Chester would bear watching.

Ben was in a troubled state of mind. He had always liked Ned, and it was painful to think of him as a villain, but the attempt to regard him as an honest, innocent man was staggered by the opinion of the detective, and by certain events Ben had himself seen in the house. The boy had great respect for the law, and for Mr. Sloan, and

he was eager to be called into service again by the detective, but whenever he thought of it there arose one troublesome question: What if it should result in sending Ned to prison as Franklin Damon's assailant.

"I don't believe he is guilty," thought Ben, loyally, "and I wish that I could prove that he ain't. I ought to give Ned the tip, I suppose, but I have promised Sloan not to say anything—and, of course, Ned don't need any caution if he is innocent."

Ben's mind refused to give up the subject, and he finally made a resolution. Ned was supposed to have passed the night with his friend, Alfred Marsh, on Henry street. If he was there all night he could not have been inside Franklin Damon's house. Ben knew one of the employees at Marsh's, a youth of about his own age; and he resolved to go over and see him after breakfast.

He did this, and found his young friend at liberty. They began to talk, and Ben waited for Pete to mention the assault. He waited in vain; Pete did nothing of the kind; and Ben had to begin.

"We are all stirred up over at our house."

"Are you?"

"Yes; on account of Mr. Damon, you know."

"Yes."

"Too bad about him."

"Yes."

Pete seemed determined to answer in monosyllables.

"Were you here when they told Mr. Chester?"

"I didn't see it done," replied Pete.

"You saw Ned the evening before?"

"Yes."

"What time did he come here?"

"About eight, I guess."

"Did he and Mr. Marsh go out?"

"No."

"Then Ned was here all night?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

Pete had been looking at the floor, as though he saw something very interesting there, but he now looked at Ben sharply.

"What're you so mighty partic'lar about?" he asked, rudely.

"Don't be cross, Pete. This is a private talk between us two, you know. I'd like to be sure Mr. Chester was here all night."

Pete hesitated, and then slowly replied:

"I'm afraid you won't be sure of it."

"Why not?"

"Can you keep mum, Ben?"

"You bet I can."

"Then I'll tell you somethin'. It's been on my mind ever sence I heerd Damon was hurt, an' it's troubled me. You are in the fam'ly, an' I know you like Ned, so I can trust you. I want advice about it, so I'll tell you an' let you say what I'd better do."

This vague, rambling speech, taken in connection with Pete's sober looks, troubled Ben, but he readily replied:

"Go on; let me hear all."

"Mr. Marsh put Ned in the next room to him, but he didn't stay there. He left the house in the middle of the night, Ned did, an' I don't know where in the world he went. I'm sorry, for Ned was kind to me; give me nickels an' dimes now an' then, Ned did."

"Come right to the point," impatiently requested Ben.

"Well, you see it was like this: That evenin' I had a new book to read, an' I got a good deal interested in it. The other servants made me go to my room at half-past nine, but I was bound to finish that book before I went to sleep. I didn't dare ter read in my room, for the light might be seen, so I waited a while, and then went down ter the basement. There I lighted a kerosene lamp, settled down in a corner and went to readin'."

"It took me longer than I had expected, an' it was past twelve o'clock when I got to the last page. When I was all through I put out the light, an' was jest goin' up-stairs when I heard a key click in the basement door. I hadn't time ter skip past an' go up ahead of him, so I stopped right in the kitchen. Somebody come in, an' then I heerd a match struck. The gas was lit, an' there stood Ned Chester."

"And he had come in from out-of-doors?" asked Ben.

"Yes."

"Go on," grimly directed young Hamlin.

"I couldn't imagine at first why he had lit the gas, but I soon see. He took off his coat, an' then I seen that it was ripped a long way down one of the seams. He seemed to be troubled about it, an' stood lookin' at it some time. Then he put it on ag'in, turned off the gas, an' went

up-stairs. I didn't dare foller fur sev'ral minutes, but when I did go, there wa'n't no light in his room. I ain't never heerd mention made o' his goin' out, but I did hear Mr. Marsh say that Ned was here all that night. I guess he don't know that Ned was out, but you've heerd what I know."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DETECTIVE'S CLEW.

BROOKLYN BEN'S expression was very grave. "You're sure this was night before last?" he asked.

"I be," Pete answered.

"The night Franklin Damon was assaulted?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice Ned's coat at breakfast?"

"The one he had on was not tored, but he has a gripsack full o' clothes up-stairs."

"Did you see him when he heard that Damon was hurt?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Nothin', at first, an' then says he: 'The wicked don't prosper fur more'n a season,' or somethin' o' that sort. I don't know jestly what he meant by that. Mr. Marsh asked him, but he didn't explain."

Ben knew that the words had referred to Franklin Damon, and he wondered more than ever what had been the cause of the quarrel between Damon and Ned. He did not care to pursue the inquiry with Pete any further. He had come there to clear Ned Chester, but instead of doing so, he had gained news which seemed to envelop the young sailor tighter than ever in the web. Ben decided that the only thing he could do was to go home and have no more to do with the affair.

He left Pete after the latter had required and secured a promise of secrecy—Ben was ready enough to make it—and walked homeward, but when a block distant he found himself suddenly confronted by Sloan. The detective had lost all fascination for the youth, and he wished he had never seen him.

"Good-morning, Ben," said Sloan, cheerily.

"Good-morning, sir."

"How do you feel, after last night's experience?"

"All right, sir."

"Any tender bones?"

"Not to speak of."

"When I first saw you at Damon's, why didn't you tell me about Ned Chester's quarrel with his uncle?"

Wily Mr. Sloan had kept conversation on trivial matters, and smiled very pleasantly; then, when he had lulled Ben's suspicions, he flung this question at him with startling abruptness.

Ben was not in the least prepared. Taken unawares, he was startled. He recoiled, changed color, stared at Sloan and said nothing.

"What was the quarrel about, Benjamin?" pursued the detective, coolly.

Ben grew indignant. He knew perfectly well that Sloan had laid a trap for him, and taken him by surprise on purpose to make him show guilt; and the fact that the scheme had succeeded so well, made Ben all the more angry. From that moment the detective lost his sympathies, and, regardless of veracity and the claims of law, he quickly decided to deny everything.

"I don't know anything about any quarrel," he stoutly asserted.

"Benjamin!"

"What is it?"

Sloan disregarded his young ex-friend's rudeness, and calmly answered:

"I thought that you wanted to be my ally?"

"So I do."

"And you begin by denying a known fact!"

"There is some mistake, Mr. Sloan."

"I should say so. All my witnesses at Damon's stated that, as far as their knowledge went, there had been no quarrel between Damon and any other person. It seems that each and all of them spoke falsely. There had been a bitter quarrel between Damon and Ned Chester, and every one of you knew it. Shallow-pated mortals! did you think you could hide the fact?"

The detective spoke in a tone of conviction which kept Ben silent. He felt that it would be useless to deny the fact, and he was determined not to admit it.

"Ben, what was the quarrel about?" asked Sloan.

"I have nothing to say."

"Do you refuse to answer?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are foolish," was the steady reply.

"You must know that you are liable to get

yourself into trouble; the law is not a good thing to fight against. I tell you that fairly, my lad. And what good will it do you to be stubborn? I have the truth at last, and can easily get answers to my questions. I would prefer to have you make the answer, so that I need not ask anything publicly."

"I will say one thing, Mr. Sloan. If I know of any quarrel—I don't admit that I do—I don't know what it was about. That is just as true as we are living."

"Humph!"

The detective looked steadily at his companion, as though to read his inmost thoughts. Ben met his gaze fearlessly.

"Who do you think would know the cause of the quarrel?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Rosalthe Damon?"

"Perhaps she is like me—don't know of any quarrel."

Sloan turned abruptly away, and then hesitated and looked back at Ben.

"You can rely upon one thing, young man. I have the clew in this case, and I shall follow it to the end. Few, indeed, are the cases I lose, and this will not be one of them; I shall win. You have seen fit to break off our alliance, and you will get no good out of it; I tell you that plainly. Possibly the law will yet give you a taste of its way of doing business!"

With this significant observation the detective hastened away, leaving Ben gazing after him with a troubled expression. Everything seemed going to ruin at full speed. Sloan was angry with him, and his threats lingered in the boy's mind. Then there was Ned Chester, drifting toward a whirlpool of danger, and Ben very much feared, really guilty. The quarrel with Damon, and his secret trip from Marsh's house, were significant. And the torn coat—what did that mean, if not that it was torn in a struggle with some one?

"Poor Ned!" muttered Ben, "I'm afraid he's in a very bad fix. It seems impossible to believe that he ever did it, but the case looks dark."

The boy walked slowly along, but suddenly paused again.

"I won't believe it!" he declared, aloud. "He ain't the man to do such a thing, and I know it. He is innocent!"

It was all very well to say this, but Ben knew he was taking a course in opposition to everything reasonable; appearances were against Ned. This made Ben all the more for him. Having once decided as to his course, the obstacles which beset his way of belief only made him all the more stubborn.

"Ned is innocent, and I wish I knew some way to help him. Wonder how it would work to put him on his guard? But no; I promised Sloan to keep still, and I doubt if it would help Ned a bit to be scared ahead of time."

Walking in an absent-minded mood Ben drew near Damon's house. He had reached a street letter-box when he saw some one standing beside it, evidently posting a letter. This person was no stranger; he recognized Kitty Miles, the second girl-servant at Damon's.

Instinctively his gaze fell to the letter she held poised in her hand, and he saw the superscription. Boldly written, three words stared him in the face.

"Mr. Exlon Blair."

Another instant, and before he could read the rest of the address, the letter had been shoved into the box. Kitty turned away. She had not noticed that one of the several persons moving on the sidewalk was Ben Hamlin, and she walked quickly toward the house.

Ben followed more slowly. The fact that Kitty had mailed a letter to Exlon Blair impressed him as very peculiar. What did it mean? The superscription had been in coarse, masculine-looking writing, but he had not recognized it. Here was a new mystery, and Ben was puzzled to explain it.

He suddenly quickened his steps.

"There may be something worth seeing when she gets home," he thought.

Acting upon this idea he walked rapidly, intending to enter the house with her. She, however, met a friend and stopped for a moment and Ben went ahead. When he entered the basement hall Ned Chester was there, walking slowly back and forth. Ben went to the kitchen but lingered by the door.

Kitty soon appeared, and Ned stopped his aimless promenade.

"Did you mail my letter?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the girl answered.

"You put it in the box with your own hands, eh?"

"I did, Mr. Chester."

"All right, then; that will do."

Kitty went up-stairs, while Ned assumed a thoughtful attitude and lingered by the door.

"That settles it," muttered Ben. "He's been writing to Exlon Blair, and I must say I don't like the looks. If Sloan knew all that I do he'd arrest Ned right off, and I guess he will do so soon, anyway. It would take a pretty sanguine person to believe Ned innocent now."

The dining-room door opened and Jules Lefranc came out.

"Can I speak with you, Mr. Chester?" asked the cook.

"Certainly, Jules."

"Matters are in a bad way, sir."

"How so?"

"You know what I told you about Lois?"

"Yes."

"What you suppose she has said now?"

"I'm not good at guessing. Tell me!"

"Well, you know that she and I have been engaged, but she acts very queer now. Ever since that night she shrinks from me as though I was poison, and when I tried to put my arm around her waist, she said she wasn't going to be touched by a murderer, and then she run away."

"The dickens she did!"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you understand by that?"

"There is only one way to look at it, Mr. Chester; she thinks it was I who tried to kill Franklin Damon!"

"What nonsense!"

"That is just what it is, but how am I to convince her that I am innocent?"

"I can't very well step forward and prove it."

"I should say not," hurriedly answered Lefranc.

"I really can't see why Lois should get such an absurd idea into her head," thoughtfully added Chester. "What possible object could you have for injuring Damon? You did not quarrel with him as I did."

"Don't speak of that, sir!" advised Jules, looking around hastily.

"Do you know I have half a mind to own up and let them do with me as they see fit? Whatever I am, it don't come natural to me to be a hypocrite. I don't love Franklin Damon, so why should I go around and pretend that I do? Love him! He is a first-class knave!"

Ned threw up one hand with an angry gesture, while Brooklyn Ben watched and listened behind the kitchen door with eager attention.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PARLOR SCENE.

LEFRANC again looked around to make sure that nobody was listening. He did not see Ben, and did not suspect that the keen-eyed youth was seeing and hearing all.

"I think you are reckless to speak so about Mr. Damon," the cook answered.

"So they all tell me," admitted Ned, "but I know him better than anybody else in the house, and I speak of him as I know him. I'm not in the habit of hiding my opinions. Frankness may be a bad thing, but it's a way I got while sailing on old ocean."

"It is reckless, here."

"Possibly you're right, Jules, so I'll say no more. Well, I'm going up aloft now. Quiet that tiger-cat lady-love of yours, and assure her you have not turned assassin. You! Why, I'd wager my last dollar on your uprightness, Jules!"

"Thank you, Mr. Chester," answered Lefranc, with visible emotion. "You are very kind to me, and if I can help you in any way, you may depend upon me to do it."

The men shook hands and separated. Ned went to the upper part of the house, and Jules returned to the dining-room, while Ben Hamlin seized the chance to follow in young Chester's steps.

"The mystery deepens!" thought Ben, "and I can't for the life of me understand what all this means. If Ned really is the guilty person, he is the most deceitful man I ever knew. But what about the coat he had torn the night Damon was wounded? And what about his letter to Exlon Blair?"

Ben shook his head soberly, and then added:

"I've got to sit down, think it over carefully, and see if I can get daylight anywhere in the darkness."

The door of the back parlor was ajar, and he quietly entered.

He had been occupied in thinking several minutes when he heard the rustle of a dress in the front parlor. The connecting doors were but imperfectly closed, and when he went to that point he had a view of the interior.

Rosalthe was there.

Before Ben had had time to see more, the hall door opened and Ned Chester appeared. Rosalthe started up and showed plain signs of leaving the room, but Ned made a gesture which was somewhat imperative.

"Wait!" he said; "I have something to say to you."

"I am in a hurry," Rosalthe hurriedly answered.

"A great hurry, no doubt. You were sitting still when I came in, and appeared to have a generation of time on your hands. Your hurry is sudden and unnatural. Sit down, Rosalthe; I have something to say to you."

The girl remained standing, and Ben saw that her face bore a frightened expression.

"I want an explanation," Ned added, firmly.

"I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"You shall soon know. Rosalthe, I have thought you my friend. You and I have seemed to get along well, and I have been very proud of my cousin, and of her kindness to me. All of a sudden you are completely changed. You seem to have lost even your respect for me; you are as cold as ice; you shun me as though I were a pestilence. Why is it?"

He spoke with emphasis which was not unmixed with indignation, but Rosalthe shrunk back and trembled.

"Don't ask me," she replied.

"I do ask you, and I want an answer. Why is it?"

"I don't know."

"Nonsense!—you do know. Rosalthe, if I am rude I hope you will forgive me, but I can't stand this. The change began with the misfortune to Franklin Damon. Do you blame me for that?"

"I hope you are not to blame."

"You 'hope' it! What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"That won't do. I must have an answer."

"Ned, oh! Ned, don't drive me to desperation!" cried the girl. "I may say something rash."

"Say it, by all means—if it will explain matters."

"Do you think I am blind, Ned Chester?" she asked, with more spirit.

"I hope not, for one blind person in the family is enough. If you know what you mean, tell me."

"You shall know!" Rosalthe exclaimed. "You are unjust to me, when my sole object is to protect you. For your sake I have sworn to falsehoods, and not a word of credit do I get. Yes, you shall know all. When you made your secret visit here the night Uncle Franklin was wounded I saw you! The officers asked who had had a quarrel with Mr. Damon. I told them that I knew of no one. I spoke falsely; I did know of some one who had quarreled with him, and that one was *you*! They expressed the opinion that some one who knew the house well had gained entrance here, and assaulted Mr. Damon and I told them I had no idea who it could be. Again I spoke falsely—and for you. I knew who had come here secretly; I saw you. Late at night, when we were supposed to be all asleep, I saw you moving secretly in the house. And in the morning Franklin Damon lay senseless by an assassin's hand."

She had poured forth these words rapidly, in a low, concentrated voice, and Ned could be blind no longer. He had recoiled, and stood gazing at her in silent dismay.

Rosalthe ceased, and stood looking at him like an accusing spirit. She no longer shrunk and trembled, but was defending herself from his late charges of coldness.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "can it be that you suspect me of injuring Franklin Damon?"

"What else can I think?"

"I, an assassin?"

"I make no charges; I only know of the quarrel, and your secret visit to the house."

Ned caught her wrist.

"Do you know why we quarreled?"

"No."

"And yet you accuse me!"

"I have just said that I do not accuse you."

"And was it for this I upbraided Franklin Damon? Was it for this I quarreled with a man who could make me rich, or leave me a beggar, as he saw fit? You don't know why we quarreled. Well, I will tell you—no, I will not!"

He broke off suddenly, dropped her hand, and retreated a pace.

"How do you know I was here that night?" he asked.

"I saw you in the hall."

"Ah! Was I alone?"

"You were when I saw you."

"And on such evidence as this you think that I am the man who brought Damon to death's door?"

"I tell you that I make no charges. I shall make none, and no human power can make me say that I saw you in the hall. You have no right to judge me harshly if I have been overwhelmed by evidence. What would the police say if they knew that you quarreled with Uncle Franklin, and then came here secretly the night he was wounded?"

"They would say that I did the deed, and I should not blame them. I don't blame you; how could you think otherwise? Rosalthe, forgive me for my harshness; I have been a blind brute. One thing I will say, however—let appearances be ever so much against me, I am innocent; I never harmed Damon, nor was I party to the crime!"

The young sailor threw back his head and faced Rosalthe with a bold, frank expression.

"Thank Heaven!" the girl murmured.

"Do you believe me now?"

"I do—I do!"

"And can you forgive me—"

"It is not for me to forgive. It is I who have done the wrong, and I am ashamed to ask forgiveness."

"Don't do it, then; don't do it. My cousin, you and I are not going to let such a little thing be a stumbling-block. There is a better way to settle it."

The sailor bent his head, and, with the audacity peculiar to young men, kissed Rosalthe before she could object.

Just then a footstep sounded in the hall, and they had only time enough to move away from each other when Miss Hannah Damon, who was an aged relative and a superannuated housekeeper in one, entered. Long before she had ceased to be of any practical use in the house, but, in a general way, she kept her place, and she made a journey over the house now and then on general principles.

Her eyesight having become poor, she now recognized Ned and Rosalthe without suspecting anything unusual had occurred there.

"My dear children," she said, in a mild voice, "I have good news for you. Franklin Damon shows signs of recovering consciousness."

The young couple exchanged a quick glance.

"The doctor says that the case is a peculiar one," pursued Miss Hannah, "and he don't know how to understand it. Mr. Damon is muttering to himself—muttering very oddly. You seem to be in his mind, Mr. Chester. He once cried out, quite sharply: 'Don't kill me, Ned!' Wild words, of course, but I am encouraged; it shows that his mind is at work."

Rosalthe changed color. It did not encourage her to know that Damon, in his present condition, had uttered such words; it startled her.

"I want you, Rosalthe," added Miss Hannah. "Lois and I need your advice; pray come at once."

The mild old lady was wholly unconscious that she had stated a startling fact. Ned looked disturbed, while Rosalthe's perturbation was shown by the haste with which she answered the call. She went out, while Miss Hannah only paused to tell Ned to be of good courage, and to hope for his uncle's recovery. Then she followed.

Ned stood pulling viciously at his mustache for a few moments, and then abruptly left the room.

Brooklyn Ben drew a deep breath and stood erect. He felt ashamed of having acted the listener, but he had heard something of importance. The interview, however, had left him in a frame of mind as uncertain as ever. Ned's declaration of innocence had almost convinced him at the time, but his hopes had been staggered by the old lady's revelation.

Franklin Damon, in his semi-delirium, had plainly muttered: "Don't kill me, Ned!" Ominous words! In themselves they were enough to direct suspicion to young Chester, and when taken in connection with what Ben already knew about Ned, they made a strong case.

"Deeper and deeper into the dark!" thought Ben, "but the end of the trail ain't reached yet. I've got a few points I want to work up, and something may come of it."

He left the back parlor just in time to see Ned leave the house abruptly, his manner singularly nervous. Plainly, he, too, had been upset by Miss Hannah's statement.

Ben looked across the way. Detective Sloan was at his post, but, a few moments later, the boy saw him hurry down the street after Ned Chester.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOONER.

THE day passed slowly on. Ben Hamlin attended to his work, did a good deal of thinking,

and watched whatever took place within his sight. Reports from the sick-room were to the effect that Franklin Damon was still muttering uneasily, but he had not regained consciousness.

Ned Chester did not return, nor did Mr. Sloan reappear at the window across the way. Ben wondered what they were doing, but he had no means of knowing.

It was five o'clock when Ben was sent to polish the plate on the front door. As he stepped out on the stoop he heard voices in the area.

"Mr. Blair wants an answer," said a boyish voice.

"Tell him I will be there; that is all the answer I can give now."

The basement door closed somewhat noisily, and, a moment later, a boy came out of the area. He was fairly dressed, but his face was coarse and hardened. He looked like one who was destined to be a "prison-bird" in time. He walked away down the street with a sulky air.

Brooklyn Ben stood for a moment in irresolution, and then quickly re-entered the house and descended to the basement. He had not recognized the voice which responded to the unknown boy, and he wanted to know who it was. He was baffled. When he reached the lower floor he found Lefranc, Lois and Kittie in the dining-room, but there was nothing to show who had lately been at the door.

He decided not to ask any questions, and returned to the stoop and his work on the door-plate.

"The plot grows deeper," he thought. "That boy brought a letter or oral message from 'Mr. Blair.' Who is that? Why, Exlon Blair, of course. And one of the girls received it and sent back word that she would 'be there.' I don't know whether that was Lois or Kittie, but I've observed that Lois is all stirred up since Damon was hurt. So one of our girls is going somewhere to meet Exlon Blair! I wish I knew when she's going, and I'd be along, sure as I live!"

He scrubbed away at the door-plate, and once more occupied his mind with interesting speculations. It was significant that Exlon Blair had again popped into view like a jumping-jack, as it were, and Ben could not drop the subject.

The result of his meditations was that he determined to see Blair's friend when she left the house, if possible.

After dinner he was at liberty, and he went to his own room, which was a little den on the top floor, but at the front of the house. He sat down at the open window, thrust his head out, fixed his gaze on the area, and prepared to wait and watch.

Half an hour passed, and still the minutes wore on. He was patient, and his reward came. At last a female form came out of the basement door and moved toward the street. The figure was that of a young woman, but her vail was down and he was not certain who it was.

"Brown dress!" he muttered. "Ain't I seen that before? I have, and I know who wore it. Lois, to be sure. Yes, sree, that's her dress, and there she is inside it. Now then, is she going to meet Blair? Some mischief is up, or she would not think it necessary to go veiled. I'm going to see where she goes!"

She had started down the street, and Ben ran lightly down the several pairs of stairs until he could reach the same thoroughfare. By that time the woman in brown was nearly out of sight, but he quickened his pace and went after her as rapidly as possible.

He was led along the same course pursued on a former occasion, when he followed Sloan—to Fulton street, to Sands street, and to the East River Bridge. There the woman took a train and started for New York.

She had looked around several times, as though afraid of being followed, but Ben was sure he had not been discovered. He entered the car behind her when the bridge was reached. On their arrival at New York she descended the steps and turned to the right. Ben expected to see her go to the Bowery, but he was wrong.

Her course was through a part of Chatham street, and then along New Chambers toward the river. Having reached Cherry street she went several blocks, and then turned to the right again and went down to one of the piers.

All this was contrary to Ben's expectations, but he remembered that the captain of the band to which Blair belonged had several times referred to vessels, the ocean, and so on, and the course of events rather pleased the pursuer.

The woman in brown walked out on the pier.

Night was close at hand, business was suspended for the day, and the pier was deserted and quiet. Two vessels lay at the pier, one of which was a full-rigged ship, and the other a schooner. It was the latter upon which the

woman fixed her gaze, and Ben knew where he must center his attention. He saw three or four boxes near the edge of the pier, and he glided forward and concealed himself behind one of them.

Then he cautiously watched to see what would come next.

The deck of the schooner lay open to his observation, and he could see a single man lounging about. The woman must have seen him, too, but she moderated her pace until she barely moved, and seemed reluctant to go on.

All this served to make the schooner seem mysterious and suspicious.

Finally she advanced suddenly, and, as the unknown man moved nearer to her, addressed certain words to him which the boy did not hear. The sailor answered, and they spoke several times. Then he turned away, evidently to call some one else.

The woman in brown kept her place, while Brooklyn Ben watched eagerly to see the next sign of life on the mysterious craft. He was not long kept waiting. The sailor had called to some one in the cabin, and another man now appeared. Brooklyn Ben grew excited as he recognized the leader of the gang he had met in the Rivington street house.

Surely he was on the right track.

"The captain" advanced and spoke to the woman, and then the gang-plank was run out and she was helped to the deck.

"I s'pose they'll all go to the cabin now, and shut me off," muttered the young spy.

He was mistaken. The captain may have had his motives for not wanting any one in the cabin; certain it is that the woman in brown did not go below. She was given a seat on deck, and the captain remained talking with her. There was no sign of Exlon Blair, and this looked as though there was some flaw in the arrangement.

It was growing dark, and the watcher was impatient to see something done before his eyesight became useless.

He was not kept waiting much longer. He heard quick steps on the pier, and, being afraid of discovery, wedged himself into even smaller space. The unknown passed by without any stop, and then Brooklyn Ben, looking out once more, saw Exlon Blair going on board the mysterious schooner.

He reached the deck; the woman in brown started up; and then they shook hands cordially.

"The crisis has come, and if I was only there I could hear something," thought Ben. "If I stay here I'm of no use at all. It's mighty risky, but I'm going to make a try to hear what they say."

The captain, the woman in brown and Blair were the only persons on deck, and they were all talking together. Then, if ever, was the time to reach the side of the schooner unseen. Ben glided quickly across the pier, directly toward the gang-plank, which, he saw, might yet be of use to him. Resting at the angle it did there was a space beneath, and it was the only hiding-place near the vessel.

He gained the desired position, and then peered cautiously at the trio on deck. They were still talking busily.

"For my part," the captain was saying, "I think our friend, Blair, is very lucky to have such a charming friend as I now see before me—yourself."

"I am too unhappy to care for compliments," the girl sighed.

"Nonsense! Don't let your heart be troubled."

"I can't help it."

"My dear young lady, you must help it."

"I am going to leave Damon's."

"And go where?"

"I don't know."

"Nonsense, again! What you want to do is to marry Blair. You have found out our secrets, and now I don't mind saying that you are just the person we need. When we sail, go with us as our stewardess—and Blair's wife."

"Oh! it would frighten me to death!" exclaimed the girl.

"Do you mean the fighting?"

"Yes."

"Then put your heart at rest, for I don't think there will be any fighting. We are not going to cruise the sea like Captain Kidd, and attack everybody we find. Quite the contrary. We shall try to capture only one vessel. We have our minds on a certain merchant-ship which is due here one week hence. We shall meet her at a safe distance off Sandy Hook. She will be wholly unprepared, for nobody looks for so-called pirates around New York at this day. I believe we shall capture her without a blow being struck. Once she is ours we shall turn her nose back, and

put into another port I have in mind. Her cargo will make us all rich, and then we shall disappear at once and forever from public view. Now, you marry Blair and go along with us, and I give you my word of honor you shall see no fighting. Understand?"

Brooklyn Ben understood, whether the woman in brown did or not. The character of "the captain" and his followers was at once made clear; they actually aspired to commit piracy, and that, too, only a few miles from New York Harbor. Ben was dumfounded. He had not thought of such a thing; he could hardly credit it even now; but he knew that a bold stroke often succeeds where success seems impossible.

Wild as the scheme was, luck might favor it.

"I am terribly afraid," said the girl.

"Recollect," urged Blair, "that if you go to sea you leave all other troubles behind."

"And enter upon a glorious life," added the captain.

"You may fail, and be captured."

"In that case we will swear you were a prisoner among us. Eh, Blair?"

"Just so," Exlon agreed.

"Come, consent!"

"How long can I have to decide?"

"That is for you and Blair to settle. We shall not sail until a week later."

"Let me talk with her," added Blair.

"Do so, and, in the meanwhile, I will see that no spy is skulking around. We have neglected to watch."

He moved toward the gang-plank, and the boy listener made a dive for cover. Partially dropping between the pier and the schooner, he crouched silently under the gang-plank. The captain looked sharply around, while Brooklyn Ben anxiously awaited the result.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DETECTIVE'S HOUR OF TRIUMPH.

THE clock in Franklin Damon's house struck ten o'clock. Just then there was a call for Ben Hamlin, but Ben was not there to answer. Jules Lefranc had to volunteer in his place, and the physician gave him a sealed note.

"Take this to the police-station, and give it to the officer in charge," he directed.

Jules did the errand as quickly as possible. He found a sergeant at the desk, and that officer, opening the letter, read as follows:

"Franklin Damon is conscious, and I think you may safely talk with him long enough to learn the particulars of the assault. I have asked nothing, and he has explained nothing, but his mind is clear. Come if you wish, but make the interview short and simple. His case is very peculiar, and his strength remarkable for one thus injured, but he must not be irritated or fatigued."

To this was signed the name of the attending physician.

The sergeant turned to a subordinate.

"Is Detective Sloan about?"

"I haven't seen him, sir."

"Then Brodby must go."

He called that officer, gave him due directions, and sent him off with Lefranc. Mr. Brodby was in high spirits. He had not forgotten how Sloan had snubbed him; the slight still rankled; and he was already anticipating the pleasure he would feel when he could "crow" over the detective, as he mentally expressed it.

Damon's house was soon reached, and Mr. Brodby's name was sent to the physician. The latter came out, repeated his cautions, and then, having duly notified Damon, ushered the officer into the room.

The wounded man lay upon the bed. His face was pale, and his head bound in cloths, but his eyes were clear and intelligent, and he did not then look like a desperately ill man.

"Mr. Damon, this is Mr. Brodby," said the doctor.

Mr. Brodby bowed very low.

"They tell me you have been sent from the police-station," added Damon in a low, but steady voice.

"I have, sir."

"Had I known of it I should have vetoed the whole idea, but since you are here, I will see you. What do you want?"

"We have been—a—trying to find the man—who injured you," stammered Brodby, who did not feel at ease.

"Have you found him?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any clew?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"When you catch him you may let me know."

"Thank you—that is, yes, sir. But, sir, I have called to have you tell me who he is."

"I can't tell you."

"Didn't you recognize him?"

"No."

"How was it done?"

"I can't tell you."

"Do you mean that you were asleep?"

"No; I was awake."

"If you will tell me about it," said Brodby, somewhat bewildered, "I will write down your statement."

"I have no statement to make."

"I don't understand, sir."

"I will try to make myself plain. I have nothing to say. It is my wish that the police abandon all efforts to find the man who assaulted me, and let the matter drop out of sight forever. If they insist upon continuing their efforts they will have to work alone; I decline to have them in any way. If the guilty person is brought before me I shall refuse to recognize him. I will not say another word in regard to the case, now or in the future. Tell your superiors this, and say to them, my advice is that they let the case alone. Doctor, I wish to be alone now."

The physician had already risen. Calm as Damon was he knew that conversation would exhaust him, and that he had said enough. The medical man opened the door, and actually shoved poor, bewildered Brodby out of the room. The latter had lost his head completely in his surprise.

"Is the man crazy?" he whispered.

"His mind is as clear as yours or mine," replied the doctor. "More than that I cannot say; I am as much bewildered as you are. Good day!"

And Brodby stood alone in the hall.

He went slowly down the stairs. Just as he reached the lower hall Lefranc opened the outer door and three men entered. The first was Detective Sloan; the second was a stranger; the third was Ned Chester. Brodby was not pleased to see the detective, then, and he was going out without a word when Sloan stopped him.

"One moment, Brodby. I have just come from the station, and have a note for you."

He gave it to the policeman, who read as follows:

"Report to Mr. Sloan whatever you have learned, and hold yourself subject to his orders."

It was another bitter dose, but the sergeant's name was signed and there was no help for it. Sloan nodded to Lefranc.

"Show us into the parlor, and attend upon us. I have something to say."

Jules had changed color when he saw Sloan and Ned together, and he was now convinced that Ned was a prisoner. His worst fears were confirmed. A short time before he had noticed that Lois was gone from the house, and he had suspected trouble. He was now sure that the blow had fallen. The five men entered the parlor.

"Jules," brusquely continued the detective, "tell us all about Mr. Chester's visit here the night that Franklin Damon was injured."

Lefranc was frightened, but he had enough of the stubborn element in his composition to be true to Ned.

"I don't know anything about such a thing," he stoutly replied.

"Don't lie, Jules."

"I am not lying."

"What a foolish fellow! I shall begin to think you, too, are guilty. I have arrested Mr. Chester on charge of having tried to kill Damon. Will you be a witness, or a fellow-prisoner of the accused?"

Sloan spoke very sharply, but Jules, though alarmed, was firm.

"I don't know anything at all about it," he answered.

"How transparent we are when we lie!" quoth the detective, rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling. "Any child would know that you were not telling the truth, my man. You had better come to time, for I have a dead sure case against Chester. He is said to have passed the night of the assault in the house of Alfred Marsh, and so he did—a part of it. During the night he left there, as I can prove; and when he returned his coat was torn, as though in a struggle. I can also prove that he was here and talked with you."

"I didn't see him!" persisted Lefranc.

Sloan smiled coldly.

"We will let it drop," he observed, and then turned to Mr. Brodby and added: "Officer, what statement did Franklin Damon make to you?"

"He refused to make any."

"How?"

"He wouldn't say a word."

"The dickens!" ejaculated Sloan, in surprise.

"He told me to say to the police that it was his wish to have the matter dropped; and if

they persisted in going on, they could have no help from him; he would not even identify the criminal, if he was brought before him."

"I see, I see!" exclaimed the detective. "All this points directly to Chester as the assailant. Damon, noble man! will not testify against his own nephew. What forgiveness! What nobility of character!"

Ned, who had maintained complete silence, smiled sarcastically.

"Justice will have its due, however," added Sloan. "Such a crime shall not go unpunished. Mr. Brodby, will you kindly act as my aid, and see that Miss Rosalthe Damon appears here without delay?"

Brodby bowed stiffly and withdrew.

"That confounded detective is on top!" he muttered. "I'd give a year's salary if I could see him beaten, but he has got it down fine, I suppose. It is too bad!"

The officer came upon Rosalthe at once, by chance, and delivered Sloan's message. Willy Mr. Brodby did not intend to have her surprised, and thus frightened into betraying her secrets, so he hurriedly told just what she must expect. She grew very pale when she heard that Ned was under arrest, but did not otherwise show as much agitation as was to be expected.

Brodby did his best to encourage her, and then she entered the parlor. She bowed stiffly to Sloan, and ignored everybody else.

"Miss Damon," said the detective, abruptly, "I have made an arrest."

"Of these four men?" Rosalthe asked, with perceptible sarcasm.

"No; of Mr. Chester."

"Did it take four to arrest him?"

Sloan frowned.

"No levity, if you please, Miss Damon. What I now want is to have you state what you know about Chester's visit here the night that Franklin Damon was wounded."

"Was Mr. Chester here?" innocently asked Rosalthe.

"You saw him."

"Pardon me, Mr. Sloan, but have you more than human knowledge? You have asked me to tell my story, and now you are trying to tell it for me. You assume too much, sir!"

Rosalthe who had been considered one of the gentlest of girls, had suddenly assumed a severe, haughty manner, and Sloan, experienced man of the world that he was, grew confused. Was he to be put down by a mere girl? He tried to retort, stammered, and then grew red in the face with vexation and chagrin.

"Do you deny that you saw Chester here?" he demanded, as soon as he could speak.

"I do!"

Steadily and proudly Rosalthe uttered the words. She was not speaking the truth, but there are times when few persons hesitate to tell a falsehood. One is when a friend is accused; right or wrong, all who love him then rally to his aid. Right or wrong, Rosalthe looked very beautiful as she stood there with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Beware!" cried Sloan. "Be careful that you do not make yourself party to a crime."

"It is for you to beware, sir!" sternly uttered Ned Chester. "Miss Damon is not obliged to answer any question out of court, and you have no right to act the bully here. If you insult her, sir, you shall answer to me!"

The door-bell rung.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEN HAS A WORD TO SAY.

LEFRANC was not so absorbed in what was going on that he could not hear the bell. He did hear it, and force of habit made him hasten to answer the ring. His departure from the room broke the intense concentration of thought which reigned there, and, aggressive as Ned's last remarks had been, all waited in silence without knowing why they did so.

There was a murmur of voices in the hall, and then three persons entered, Lefranc, Ben Hamlin, and a tall, soldierly-looking gentleman. At sight of the latter Sloan quickly arose, for he recognized in him one of the leading detectives of the day, and his acknowledged superior. This gentleman may be known here as Mr. White.

Sloan bowed, and was about to say something, but White, giving him only a nod, addressed Ned:

"Is this Mr. Chester?"

"That is my name, sir."

"Then I have good news for you: the would-be murderer of your uncle is arrested!"

Sloan's lower jaw fell.

"He is in the hall," added White, "and with your permission, I will have him brought in."

Brodby's face expanded to a broad grin.

White made a motion to some one in the hall,

and then two men entered, leading a third between them. This man, who was handcuffed, was Exlon Blair.

"Here is the criminal," declared White.

"Gents," said Blair, airily, "has any one of you a bit of tobacco? I fear I shall have a toothache to-morrow, or next week, and a stitch in time is worth a pound of cure, or words to that effect."

"No doubt, Mr. Chester, you are surprised," added White.

"I confess that I am, though if the man proves to be the guilty party, I shall always wonder that I did not suspect it before."

"He is the guilty party, and we have his own confession to it, but I claim no credit for unearthing the fact. All the credit belongs to a young man who has proved himself a regular sleuth-hound. This is he."

And the detective chief laid his hand on Brooklyn Ben's shoulder.

"Here is our young Vidocq," he declared.

"Don't flatter me," demurred Ben, smiling; "it was only luck, and a little reasoning."

"And it was the reasoning that won the game," declared White. "Mr. Chester, do you suspect what led to Blair's crime?"

"Unfortunately I do," Ned answered, in a low voice. "I trust that you will not make the affair public—"

"I have made it public already," loudly proclaimed Blair, "and I am not going up to Sing Sing without letting the whole world know that the high-and-lofty nabobs are just as much villains as the common trash like me. The police know me as a skillful forger. Mr. Franklin Damon heard of me, too, and he made my acquaintance—"

"I beg that this story be suppressed," cried Ned.

"It shall not be suppressed," persisted Blair.

"Let him tell it," gravely added White.

"We of the Police Department can't hush up such a case as the deadly assault upon Mr. Damon, and all the facts must come out."

"That's right and proper," said Blair. "You see, Franklin Damon sent for me and said that he had heard how skillful I was with the pen, and he had some work for me to do. It seems that his business was in a bad way, and he wanted more money. He was guardian to Rosalthe Damon, but no settlement of her father's affairs had been made, or would be until she was twenty-one years old. Franklin had absolute control, and nobody but him knew a thing about her affairs, or how much money she had in cash, real estate and so on. Her guardian knew this, of course, and his plan was simple: he proposed to have me forge a paper which would set ten thousand dollars of her property over on his side of the fence at a few sweeps of the pen."

Blair paused, looked at the eager faces before him, and then laughed lightly.

"I can't be hauled up for that forgery, for it was never done. Luck was against it. Several interviews were necessary, and Ned Chester finally discovered the scheme by chance. He accused Damon, and I hear that they had a high-daddy row. Damon finally agreed to drop the idea if Ned would keep mum. Ned kept his promise, but Damon was not so conscientious. He sent for me again; I came the night he was hurt; he let me in at the front door with his own hands; and we went secretly to his room. There we quarreled. I asked for more pay; he got angry and attacked me; we had a hot fight and I beat him senseless. That is how Franklin Damon was hurt, gents."

Brodby looked at dumfounded Mr. Sloan with a smile.

"After settling him," added Blair, "I locked the door of his room and pushed the key back under the door. I had a sweetheart in the house, in the person of Kitty Miles, and she let me out of the house and locked the basement door behind me."

"Let young Ben Hamlin tell how he followed Kitty Miles, to-night," now ordered White.

Ben told the story modestly. In the account of that pursuit already given one fact was kept back—although Ben at first supposed the woman in the brown dress to be Lois, he soon discovered her to be Kitty Miles. From the point where we left him he continued the story in these words:

"The captain did not see me as I crouched under the gang-plank, but went back on the deck of the schooner. I had found out that the men intended to be pirates, and I went and told a policeman. Just then, a roundsman came along. He doubted my story, but was willing to test it. We went back toward the schooner. Kitty had gone below, and the captain and Blair were talking. We listened.

"It seems they were afraid that Kittie, who had learned their secrets by chance, would betray them, and were resolved to take her to sea, whether or no. Blair had before told the captain that he assaulted Franklin Damon, and they talked about it freely. The roundsman and I both heard Blair confess, and then we went to the station, got more police and arrested the whole gang of pirates, including Blair, the captain and Kittie."

"I first suspected Kittie this afternoon. I saw her mail a letter to Exlon Blair, and when she came into the house Ned Chester asked her if she had mailed his letter."

"The letter I sent by her," interrupted Ned, "was not to Blair, but to Captain Bings, of Boston, under whom I served my first term at sea."

"I found out before long it was not you that addressed the letter to Blair," responded Ben, with a nod. "Do you remember how I came to your room, and got you to back a letter forme?"

"Yes," Ned replied.

"That was to see your writing. I knew then you had not backed the letter to Blair, and, coarse as the hand was, I suspected it was Kittie who wrote it. I know, now, that she did."

"I will explain about the torn coat," put in Chester. "I did come here the night Damon was injured, but I did not see him. I had determined to skip the town, being disgusted with my uncle. I came to get my own money I had in my own room, and was admitted by my good friend, Jules Lefranc. My coat was torn on my way home by a drunken man who met me on the street, and grasped me roughly."

For the benefit of the reader, a short explanation of certain facts which were slowly revealed may be given at once. Only Kittie Miles was knowing to Blair's assault on Damon, but several persons drew wrong conclusions.

Lefranc, knowing that Ned had been in the house, was very much afraid that his young master really did commit the assault. Rosalthe, having chanced to see Ned in the hall, entertained the same fear. Lois Beauvais had seen Jules return after letting Ned out of the house, and she leaped to the conclusion that Jules was the criminal, while Old Eagan founded his suspicion against Rosalthe on a mere trifle—an interview between the girl and Damon.

Thus, slight circumstances gave the various parties wrong impressions which worried them greatly, but, as we have seen, all were bent on keeping their secrets.

Percy Grayson entered the parlor. He started back with an appearance of surprise.

"What does all this mean?" he asked.

"You know well enough!" retorted Sloan.

"You set me on a wrong trail! You wrote an anonymous letter to me—though I learned from whom it came—telling me that Chester was undoubtedly the guilty party, and so on. As I already suspected him, you put me all wrong. I have failed in this case, and you've got to take your share of blame, Mr. Grayson."

"The best thing Mr. Grayson can do," cried Rosalthe, remembering the man's persecution of her, "is to leave this house. We have had quite enough of him!"

The object of her anger stood red-faced, confused and silent.

"I think I will withdraw," added Sloan. "Mr. Chester, I have lost my cards; but I congratulate you. Take good care of Ben Hamlin, and—make him a *bona fide* detective!"

He bowed and withdrew, while Brodby smiled in a highly-delighted way. Ned arose and shook hands with Brooklyn Ben.

"My boy," said he, "I can't thank you enough in words, but you have done nobly, and you can count me your friend while we both live."

And Rosalthe smiled upon Ben in a way quite as pleasant as words.

After three years:

Exlon Blair, "the captain," and the other would-be pirates are in Sing Sing; Grayson is supposed to be in California, and Kittie Miles is leading an honest life in an out-of-the-way town.

Jules and Lois are married, and are still servants in the house where we met them, but the master of the house is—Ned Chester.

Franklin Damon partially recovered, but contracted pneumonia and lost his life. He died repentant, and Ned succeeded to all his property. And Ned did more—he married Rosalthe, and left the sea forever.

Ben Hamlin is at school. Ned is paying all his bills out of gratitude for his past services, and Ben's rapid progress foretells a successful future.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street, New York.